

Soul Food  
Thanksgiving Sunday  
Deuteronomy 26:1-11  
John 6:25-35  
November 21, 2010  
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It's almost Thanksgiving. Many of us have already begun feasting. This is the season of talk about food.

There's **fast food**. We're told we eat much too much of that in America. It's loaded with fat and sugar and salt. I guess that's why most people think it tastes so good.

But **slow food** is becoming popular now too. Slow food is food that is nutritious and good for the planet as well as the individual. It's harvested with methods that have a positive impact on the local ecosystem, and it's produced by people who are treated with dignity and compensated fairly for their labor. Slow food brings pleasure, especially when it celebrates culture and regional diversity.

**Comfort food** is a category of food we speak of when we want to do something nice for ourselves—like when you treat yourself to apple pie, beef stew, fried chicken, banana pudding, or chocolate chip cookies—homemade favorites from your childhood. Pumpkin pie and mashed potatoes appear on the comfort food lists, and of course, they are a "given" for the traditional Thanksgiving menu. It depends who you are, comfort food might be, for you, your mother's *lumpia*, Grandma's grits, Chinese pork dumplings, or Japanese *miso* soup—it really depends what culture you come from.

I've always liked the term "**soul food**." Soul food has elements of slow food and comfort food. The term "soul food" became popular in the 1960s. It refers to the traditional cuisine of African Americans, and is closely related to Southern cooking in general. Soul food has always been food for poor folks: greens, chitterlings, and corn bread. Native American people were poor too, and ate many of the same foods. Both African American and Indian cultures stress sharing food—our Methodist potluck dinner tradition has this nice sharing trait also.

But "soul food" to us in the church also has another meaning. It's warm, like comfort food. It's developed slowly with local ingredients, like slow food. But soul food for Christians is even more than a good potluck supper. It's food that never perishes. It's food that never runs out.

It's the kind of food the Israelites received from heaven, called manna, enough for all. It is the kind of food the writer of John's Gospel talks about when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life."

Sometimes this soul food takes us by surprise. The Gospel reading starts, "When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus had disappeared after he had taken a boy's 5 barley loaves, and God had made them into 12 baskets of bread to share with the crowd. Even after this feeding miracle, the people still don't know that Jesus has already brought them a greater kind of food than the loaves of bread that they all ate. The people around Jesus are always confused and a little slow, and in this passage they have more questions: "What do we have to do to do God's work?" And Jesus, probably getting a little impatient, says, "This *is* God's work—that you believe in me." "But what signs will you give us?"—They need it spelled out. So Jesus says, "Don't you remember, it was God who gave manna from heaven. And now God is giving you food that gives life to the world!" And the people *want* that food, the kind that feeds the soul. And then Jesus says it all: "I am the bread of life, he who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty." This is the manna from heaven; this is the living water. This food never perishes; it never runs out.

This soul food takes us by surprise when we forget the source. Sometimes it takes a special occasion to remember that God is the source of all we need. If you have been hospitalized and have felt the effect of prayers of the community, you may then remember that it is God's love that sustains you in hard times. It may take you by surprise to realize how filled you are even in a desperate time of uncertainty.

People often speak of getting through a time of mourning after the death of a loved one by the support of friends. "I couldn't have made it without them," you'll hear people say. That is God's love, working through the people who care about you in your life.

You may have had a time when things were pretty dark. Perhaps you were alone or afraid. You may have just heard you will lose your job. Or you may be left alone after the death of a spouse or by divorce. And then sometime after the immediate crisis, you had an awakening, and you felt a presence of God in your life—God was always there, but you were not aware of God. It came as a surprise that God supplied everything you needed to go on. It may have been the moment you knew you believed for the first time. You may have said it in Christian words: "I accept that Jesus is my Lord and Savior." Or you may have just felt a sense of peace that you later called God. We have different language for the power and presence of the Holy. But when we feel the awe and the ease, then we know we are not alone. Today I'd like to call this power and presence, this awe and ease, "**soul food.**"

Jim and I just came back from a vacation to Boston and to Chicago. The cities were determined by particular dates given to us, an opera our Son sang in Boston, and a physics meeting Jim was to attend in Chicago. But I discovered a surprising connection between these two locations. It hit me when we went to the top of the John Hancock building—to the 94th floor for a panoramic view of Chicago. There on the observation deck was a timeline of the history of Chicago, and prominent in the line of dates was the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

That event triggered in me the memory of my great grandfather, Robert Leslie, who came from Shetland (north of Scotland) to America at the end of the 19th century and found work in Chicago after the fire. Out of ashes, new life. Living was tough for an immigrant, but there was opportunity in this country if one was willing to work. And so Robert worked at any job he could get. He saved money and then went back to Shetland and brought his mother and sisters over the Atlantic. Then Robert married another Scot named Mary Campbell, and they made a home in Tolono, Illinois. The town was incorporated in 1894, about the time they settled there among Native Americans and immigrants from Germany, England, Ireland, France, and Scotland. Robert and Mary had four children; they all went to the University of Illinois—it's remarkable that they could afford that—and then the two boys, my grandfather and great uncle, went on to seminary at Boston University and became Methodist ministers. My grandfather lived in a house in Brookline, Massachusetts, on the same street our son, three generations later, rented a room in a house. So, the Boston connection. One of them, at least...

The other side of my family, my mother's side, traces back to the Mayflower. John Alden and Priscilla Mullins met on the voyage to Plymouth Rock and were married in Plymouth in 1623. My mother and I are direct descendents of these Pilgrims who came to the New World in the 17th century looking for a place to worship God freely, their own way. Eventually, my ancestors moved to Boston and for a time, my grandmother studied music at the New England Conservatory, where our son also studied, three generations later.

These connections have taken me by surprise. Have I forgotten the source? It's all coming back, the memory that God is with us through it all, that coincidences are maybe not just fortuitous luck. Maybe there is destiny. Maybe there is a creator's plan. Maybe there is a thread that sustains us, that nourishes us and gives us hope. I believe there is. I choose to call it **soul food**.

John called this soul food the "bread of life," when Jesus said, "I am the bread of life," but that was too hard to completely digest, so he also said, "I am the gate for the sheep." But that was too narrow, so he also said, "I am the good shepherd." But that was too individual, so he also said, "I am the true vine." But that was too immediate, so he also said, "I am the light of the world." How much more far reaching can you get than that?

"I am the light of the world—in me there is no darkness,"—this is the message of Advent, beginning next Sunday. "I am the bread of life—in me you will never hunger or thirst,"—this is the message of communion, our reminder of the source, the source of sustenance and love.

When we are reminded of the source of life, the soul food of our existence, we can only respond with thanksgiving. Today we remember to give thanks for our heritage, what brought us to this place. For this country and the freedom to worship as we choose. For our families and loved ones and the blessings they are to us. And above all, we give thanks for the great provider, the source of all we have and all we know. This source of life is

made known to us in Jesus, God incarnate, whom we acknowledge to be all we need, the very bread of life.

If you are hungry for meaning in your life, I hope you will find it here at St. John's, where there is plenty of food for thought, food that feeds the soul.