

**SPIRITUAL FLAB**  
*Sermon for Pentecost 12B-Jn 6:51-58*  
LPC, 8/16/15

Hardly a week goes by when we don't hear yet another news release about the so-called "Obesity Epidemic" in America. Superficially, obesity is a simple problem of consuming too many calories and burning too few calories. But the problem, as we know, is not simple. One of the symptoms of the complexity of this issue is that in this country, obesity is linked with poverty. This would not have been true in Jesus' day. In fact, this is probably the first time in human history that poverty has been linked with obesity rather than with obesity's direct opposite, emaciation.

However, in this place and in this time, for various complicated sociological and economic reasons, the food most available to low-income people is highly processed, low in nutritional value and high in calories. Add to this that in an industrial economy, physical activity is not generally required for simple survival, and the problem becomes more acute.

Now I've spoken of the association between poverty and obesity and suggested that the reason is that people in poverty often have no choice but to eat high-calorie, low-nutrition food. But many of us here today do have a choice, and we still often opt for what is cheapest and most readily available, and, incidentally, most immediately gratifying. So obesity is not confined to the poor. Generally speaking, our culture, which is rich by the world's standards, has too much of what it doesn't need and too little of what it does need.

Now we all enjoy our Twizzlers and our potato chips and our pop. But a steady diet of such stuff makes us both fat and malnourished, a combination that would have been unthinkable in Jesus' day.

People in Jesus' day were much more familiar with the more historical face of starvation: the sunken eyes, the distended bellies, the matchstick limbs. Even well-to-do people of Jesus' day would regularly see victims of famine in the streets or in the countryside. For people living that close to the land, a drought year actually means that people die.

In such a context, Jesus' self-description as the bread of life has a more "in-your-face" connotation than it does for us. For us, bread is only one of many foods available to us, one that we may even eschew if we are gluten-intolerant or on a low-carb diet. But for the people of Jesus' day, bread was a life or death matter. For Jesus to call himself the bread of life means, quite simply, you need me or you will starve. This message probably struck close to home to an audience for whom the face of malnutrition was the same as the face of starvation.

It occurred to me that one way for us here today to perceive the full blast of Jesus' turn of phrase as his original audience did would be to bring to mind something that for us represents a more immediate picture of malnutrition – something with which we ourselves might identify, and perhaps even see in ourselves. And that is why I began by talking about the irony of obesity being a problem in America, particularly among the poor but in all levels of society. Those of us who have myriad choices still often choose wrong, and end up both fat and malnourished.

This is not just true physically, but spiritually. Spiritually as well as physically we often choose what is cheapest, most readily available, and what is most immediately gratifying, and end up both spiritually fat and spiritually malnourished.

Fat spirituality tends to show up in greeting cards, inspirational posters, bumper stickers and those heartwarming Facebook posts. They make us feel good and warm inside. I don't want to come down too hard on this stuff. But they are, in a way, like Twizzlers and potato chips. They can't be the sole basis of our full spiritual diet.

A full and nutritious spiritual diet involves scripture reading and regular worship and daily prayer, and spiritual exercise like loving and giving and forgiving and healing and feeding and standing with the poor like Jesus did. In other words, a full and nutritious spiritual diet means Jesus. In this sense Jesus really is the bread of life to us as he was to the people to whom he initially said those words.

And so, when we hear about Jesus being our bread, our true spiritual diet, the question must be asked: are we getting spiritually flabby? Is it getting hard for us to fit into our spiritual clothes – those things we've always said we believe in, but haven't really thought seriously about in years? Do we find ourselves out of breath when we climb spiritual stairs like loving and forgiving and standing with the poor? Do we talk ourselves out of the necessity of going to church – our spiritual wellness center – because we're too busy or too tired or don't feel like breaking a sweat?

Under such circumstances, as under parallel physical circumstances, the problem may be that too much of the wrong stuff is going in, and not enough of the good stuff is being generated.

Now for the good news. There is no need for us to starve in the midst of plenty. The good, nutritious spiritual diet is readily available, and it's free. Jesus is the good stuff, and God makes Jesus available to us – here today at this table, and every day.

The Jesus of love and forgiveness and healing and feeding and standing with the poor is our true food. Those who eat this food will live and live abundantly, without getting fat!

Today, we baptize Lincoln Anthony Gill. We pray that he will never know want, only abundance, but that he will learn judgment to partake wisely of that abundance, of the food that nourishes and endures. We will promise to help him learn what kind of food is good and what kind is not. We will join with him in renewing our own baptismal covenant. And then, physically, and spiritually, we will eat this good food, so freely and generously given to us.