

"You Are What You Eat"
(sermon given 6/6/10 by Scott Jansen)
Galatians 1:11-24

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[Prayer for Illumination] Light of the World, shine into our hearts. Break through the walls and the distractions, that we may connect with your Spirit here and now, through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray... Amen.

Today we honor those who are graduating, and starting a new chapter in their lives. Of course, most of you are not graduating from a school this month, but probably in some way, you are moving on to a new chapter in your life. So I thought we'd read Paul's description of how he left his past behind and how he became a new person. Listen now, for God's word for you....

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles..., I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away, at once, into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then, after three years, I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle, except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!

Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

Amen. So ends the reading and may God add a blessing to our understanding.

I want you to imagine an experiment, where psychologists gather a dozen randomly chosen twenty year olds and put them in a room together. However, one of the twelve is a plant—someone paid to act as the psychologists want. Then the psychologists introduce the group to a brand new song in a popular style. And the planted participant says right away how fantastic the song is. Then they poll the other eleven participants.... How do you think they will rate the song??? For the most part, they will rate it very highly. However, if you set up the exact same experiment and introduce the exact same song, but your plant person reacts negatively to the song, your poll will then show that most of the other folks don't like the song.

Why is that??? The truth is, we are very strongly influenced by the passions of those around us, especially those whose opinions we most value because we seek their friendships. For the same reason, you can poll any group, of any age, even ninety year olds, and you'll find that the majority of them enjoy the music that was popular when they were twenty years old.

My generation tends to like the songs that were on the radio when we were twenty. In the words of the immortal Bob Seger, "I like that Old Time Rock and Roll." And our kids think that we're old farts, but they will be the old farts thirty years from now, because they will still like the songs they like today. Few people remain on the cutting edge for very long.

When I was fourteen years old, it was tremendously important to my grandmother to teach me the dances she used to dance when she was twenty. I remember being terribly uninterested. And I remember trying to share a song with her that I really enjoyed. But, she did not challenge herself to understand what I enjoyed—she just dismissed it with a shrug.

The point is... we are not quite as free as we sometimes imagine ourselves to be. To a large extent, choices are made for us... by forces beyond ourselves. What we wear, what we eat, where we live, even where we go to worship—there's a good chance that we played a fairly minor role in such decisions.

Our families shape us, and our culture shapes us, so that we all can get along, follow the same rules, find a mate, and live a mostly

civilized life. If you consider the proverbial “boy raised by wolves.....,” you can see how very much alike we all are....

So our uniqueness comes in only minor shadings. It doesn't take much to stand out. It's hard to stop ourselves from conforming to cultural norms around us. It's a natural instinct for any social animal to want to get along with as many folks as possible. But if our environment makes us who we are, perhaps our biggest decisions come when we decide what will be present within our most immediate environment.

My sermon title says, “You are what you eat.” If you eat junk food all the time, your body will become, physically, a pile of junk. Likewise, if you surround yourself with violent images of people being murdered without a thought, you will become more and more like what those images portray. But, if you surround yourself with supporting and caring people, you will become more like those people.

This is the story of Facebook. You start off with a blank page—you are a nobody. And little by little you become somebody, you have a developed persona on Facebook. But the biggest influence on your Facebook persona is..., who do you choose to acknowledge as your friends, and who do you choose to ignore when you get a friend request? Do you count your parents as your friends? Your teachers? Your siblings? Or do you consider them to be creepers you'll do anything to exclude? Who you are on Facebook depends on who you include as friends. Whose posts will you read? You are what you eat.

I've heard many stories of the alcoholic who believes with a passionate certainty that “I can control myself and drink only in moderation when I get to the moment of truth—I am the master of my behavior.” But, then the moment comes, and the wrong path is chosen. Why? Because, it's not the choice to drink or not to drink this beer that is really important. The important decision is..., what will I put into my environment? Who will I choose to hang out with, and who will I avoid. That is where the battle is won or lost—not in some mythical “moment of truth.”

You are what you eat. If you surround yourself with people who drink to have fun, you will become someone who drinks to have fun. If you surround yourself with Fox news, you will become a believer in the propaganda of Fox news. If you surround yourself with MSNBC, you will become a believer in the propaganda of MSNBC. You become whatever you choose to ingest.

As high school students graduate and move on to a new start, you have a chance to re-form yourself—a chance to exercise some serious choice regarding who you will become. The important question isn't "what's your major," or "where are you going to school," or which sports you're playing. The important question is, "What type of friends will you bring into your sphere of influence?"???

The Apostle Paul tells us about his friends as a young man. He says that he advanced far beyond most of the young Jewish men his age. Paul won the National Merit Scholarship of his generation. He was Valedictorian of his school. He was far more zealous than his peers in learning the traditions of Judaism.

But then God presented Paul with a choice. And it's a choice that faces each of us, in one form or another. God said to Paul, you can be faithful to the traditions of your friends, or... you can be faithful to me.

And I find it interesting that Paul goes on and on in this passage insisting that he did not learn his values from any human source. He did not simply switch from one group of human friends to a different group of human friends—from one culture to another culture. He says he went away to the desert of Arabia, and then to Damascus for three years to be alone with God. Three years he spent figuring out who he was going to be. Not, who his friends wanted him to be; but who God wanted him to be. And then, he went to Jerusalem and joined the church.

All the social scientists tell us that church members live longer and happier lives. Why is that? Is it the piles of sugar we eat at coffee fellowship? Unfortunately, I highly doubt that..... Don't take my sermon title too literally now. You are what you eat. But mostly that means that your friendships will constitute your persona. If you come to church, you surround yourself with people who are trying to live a life full of love for God and love for their neighbors. They may not always succeed, but just the fact that they're trying has a profound effect on the shape of those friendships.

It's easy in today's society, especially for a younger person, to become completely submerged in a sea of screaming voices. Most kids wear i-pods out on the bike paths, and they carry cell phones so they can talk while they're walking home from school. When they get home, they sit themselves in front of a screen—either a TV, or a Playstation, or a blackberry, or a computer—where they are

bombarded by images and sounds all designed for high-speed stimulation of folks with short attention spans.

A great philosopher once said that you only know who you are... in silence. In other words, you are not truly yourself when you are surrounded by your friends, or by the voices coming out of the various screens. Then, you are just reacting to something else that comes from beyond yourself. But if you can shut all of that out, turn off all the noise..., if you can, as the Bible says, “Be still and know that I am God...,” then you will be able to discover who you truly are.

That’s what Paul did for three years. He discovered who he was, and then he was not deterred by anyone trying to convince him otherwise. Paul knew, at a deep level, what most of us can only catch a glimpse of—he knew that our identity, at its most fundamental level, is “children of God.” All the stuff you put on Facebook—your favorite movies, favorite quotes, favorite political party, favorite sports teams, and all the rest—that’s just external clothing. Those are just masks that we wear in order to get along with others.

The answer to the question, “Who Am I,” is really quite simple. We are children of God. Period. Everything else is just a transient reaction to something outside of us. Everything else will one day become obsolete and irrelevant.

This is the message Jesus was trying to teach us through this sacrament. You are what you eat. Who are you—ultimately? You are children of God, beloved children, created and sustained by the Spirit of God who lives within you. Your ultimate fuel source is God’s love. If you forget that, if you alienate yourself from the food of God, then you abandon your integrity, wholeness, and shalom. You forget who you are, and delude yourself into thinking that your transient reactions are somehow ultimate.

So, as we prepare you for life beyond high school, we celebrate this sacrament together. We remind you of who you are. And we encourage you to surround yourself with influences that will lead to wholeness, that will affirm who you are, rather than setting up false images—idols that blind you.

Think about what you eat—not only physically, but also spiritually, emotionally, and mentally. Everything you dream of becoming depends on it.

Amen.