

Innovations in Eating John 6:24-35 | 8/5/2018

Over the past century, huge changes have been made to the way food is prepared and delivered to us. *Food delivery* began in 1922. Telephone-based food ordering started at a Chinese restaurant in Los Angeles, and spread rapidly. Now, delivery is a \$43 billion business in the United States, involving apps such as Grubhub. *Drive-thru restaurants* first appeared in 1948, when In-N-Out Burger allowed people to order and pick up food without ever leaving their car. Today, up to 70 percent of fast-food sales are drive-thru, and even businesses such as Starbucks and Chipotle are in on the act.

The McDonald's system was created in 1955, using consistent preparation methods and a dependable supply chain. Now, almost every fast-food restaurant develops a similar system, with a newcomer called Just Salad bragging that its employees can toss a salad every minute. *Molecular gastronomy* was developed in 1987, when a microbiologist made ice cream with liquid nitrogen and invented the popular treat Dippin' Dots. Similar innovations, such as cooking vacuum-sealed food through a process called *sous vide* is being done at Panera.

And finally, in 2017, *robots* became the latest innovation in eating. Chowbotics is a robotic salad maker, Cafe X is a robot barista, and Domino's Pizza has announced that it will be testing delivery via self-driving cars. "Customers grab their order from the back," reports *Fast Company*, "no human interaction necessary." That's kind of creepy, isn't it? No human interaction necessary.

Jesus was a true innovator in the world of eating, but he always had a human touch. In all four gospels, Jesus feeds 5,000 people by the Sea of Galilee. With just five barley loaves and two fish, he creates a meal in which everyone gets as much as they want, and all are satisfied. That's not molecular gastronomy -- that's *miraculous* gastronomy!

Then, in the gospel of John, Jesus warns the crowd not to focus too much on the bread that he has just given them. "Do not work for the food that perishes," he says, "but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (v. 27). The people are curious about this "food that endures for eternal life," wondering what in the world Jesus is talking about. Is he speaking about easy-to-store, vacuum-sealed food, cooked with the *sous vide* process? Not exactly.

The people of Galilee have already experienced innovations in eating. Not drive-thru restaurants or food prepared by the McDonald's system, but miraculous bread that comes from heaven. "Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness," they say; "as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'" (v. 31).

Jesus knows all about this manna-style bread, but he wants to introduce something new. "Very truly, I tell you," says Jesus, "it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven" (v. 32). Bread from heaven is great, he seems to be saying, but not as awesome as the "true bread from heaven." An even bigger innovation is coming.

"The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven," Jesus announces, "and gives life to the world" (v. 33). He is talking about heavenly bread that doesn't simply fill the stomach, but actually "gives life to the world." You won't find that one on the menu at Panera. Not surprisingly, the people respond by saying, "Sir, give us this bread always" (v. 34).

We can understand their hunger, while wondering whether they really know what they are requesting. What exactly *is* this bread of God that gives life to the world? It's not a loaf that has been shot with a blast of liquid nitrogen. It's not a type of bread kneaded by a robot or delivered by a driverless car. No, this bread of God is nothing less than Jesus himself. "I am the bread of life," says Jesus. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (v. 35). The greatest of all innovations in eating is the appearance of Jesus as the "bread of life." For the first time in history, we are able to receive "the true bread from heaven" which gives life to the world and satisfies our deepest hunger and thirst.

So what does it mean for Jesus to give life to the world? The answer to this question is both universal and very personal, and both levels are equally important. After all, bread is a universal food, available almost everywhere around the world. It is also very personal in the sense that it appears in many different forms in a variety of cultures, from pitas to baguettes to tortillas to Wonder bread.

On a universal level, Jesus is the Word of God in human form. As God's Word, he existed "in the beginning with God." John tells us that all things came into being through him, and "what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (1:2-4).

Whether you are pondering the creation of the universe or the creation of life on Planet Earth, it is important to realize that Jesus was there. Everything has come into being through him, including life. The apostle Paul says much the same thing in his letter to the Colossians, when he describes Jesus as the firstborn of all creation. "All things have been created through him and for him," says Paul. "In him all things hold together" (1:15-17).

Jesus was in the beginning with God. In him all things hold together. This is the universal Jesus, the eternal bread that gives life to the world. But maybe this cosmic Christ is too big for us to swallow in one piece. It is hard to take a bite out of a loaf this large. So let's go to a much more personal level, focusing on Jesus as the bread of life for each of us. Perhaps that's why he was born in the little town of Bethlehem, which means "house of bread."

As our personal bread, Jesus gives us strength to face the challenges of life, both small irritations and huge obstacles. Everyone knows what it feels like to be "hangry" -- that is, bad-tempered or irritable as a result of being hungry. A little snack can lift your spirits and give you the strength you need to move ahead. Long-distance runners know that they cannot complete an entire marathon with the fuel they have in their stomachs from breakfast. They have to eat along the way, fueling their muscles with gel-packs and power bars and other carbohydrates.

As the bread of life, Jesus gives us the help we need. He is the Word of God in human form, offering us correction and guidance and forgiveness. He is the bread of life in human form, giving us nourishment and strength and inspiration. Without this living bread, we would quickly wear out and give up in the face of the many challenges of life. Jesus is the One who is with us and available to us, able to satisfy our hunger and our thirst.

We gather around the sacrament of the Lord's supper every Sunday. We all need the nourishment that comes from the bread and the cup of communion. When Jesus broke bread at the Last Supper and said, "This is my body that is for you," he fully expected that his followers would break the bread regularly in remembrance of him (1 Corinthians 11:24). He knew that we would need the bread of life not just once, but over and over again.

Jesus is God's greatest innovation, the one sent into the world "so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (3:16). When we believe in him and eat the bread of life, we receive the forgiveness and inspiration that we need to face the many challenges of life. Nourished by "the food that endures for eternal life," we are able to be Christ's people in the world, and point others toward the peace, justice and salvation of the kingdom of heaven (v. 27).

Over the centuries, there have been many innovations in eating, from food delivery to salad-making robots. But all of this earthly food eventually spoils; it is "the food that perishes" (v. 27). None of it endures for eternal life. Only by trusting in Jesus can we receive the bread of God which gives life to the world, both universally and personally.

Today, we join the crowd around Jesus in saying, "Sir, give us this bread always" (v. 34). And we don't have to use a telephone or an app to make the request.

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