

A Chinese story, originally told by Linda Fang at the Smithsonian in Washington D.C., illustrates our society’s obsession with food:

As the story goes, at the foot of a great mountain in China lived a father and his three sons. They were a simple and loving family. The father noticed that travelers came from afar eager to climb the dangerous mountain. But not one of them ever returned! The three sons heard stories about the mountain, how it was made all of gold and silver at the top. Despite their father’s warnings, they could not resist venturing up the mountain.

Along the way, under a tree, sat a beggar, but the sons did not speak to him or give him anything. They ignored him. One by one, the sons disappeared up the mountain, the first to a house of rich food, the second to a house of fine wine, the third to a house of gambling. Each became a slave to his desire and forgot his home. Meanwhile, their father became heartsick. He missed them terribly. “Danger aside,” he said, “I must find my sons.”

Once he scaled the mountain, the father found that indeed the rocks were gold, the streams silver. But he hardly noticed. He only wanted to reach his sons, to help them remember the life of love they once knew. On the way down, having failed to find them, the father noticed the beggar under the tree and asked for his advice.

“The mountain will give your sons back,” said the beggar, “only if you bring something from home to cause them to remember the love of their family.” The father raced home, brought back a bowl full of rice, and gave the beggar some as a thank-you for his wisdom. He then found his sons, one at a time, and carefully placed a grain of rice on the tongue of each of them. At that moment, the sons recognized their foolhardiness. Their real life was now apparent to them. They returned home with their father and as one loving family lived happily ever after.

From time to time, we gather in this place to receive a reminder of home, a taste of food that will help us remember who we are. I mean we partake of “the bread of life” that is our Father’s gift to us. This is the food of God’s kingdom, which reminds us that his kingdom is our true home. We need this reminder of heaven because we are like the sons in the story. We have left home to climb a fascinating mountain. We seem unwilling, or unable, to return home. So our Father grieves for us. Our absence fills his heart with sadness.

What is the mountain we have climbed? We could say it’s the “mountain of illusion.” We know that many have lost their way there, yet we insist on exploring it. The story mentions three danger spots on the mountain: the house of rich food, the house of fine wine, and the

house of gambling. Each of these dangers is alive and well in the USA today. A brief word about each of them.

As a society, we are fairly obsessed with food. For increasing numbers of people, food is no longer simple sustenance or a means of nourishment. It has become quite the opposite: a source of intense confusion, guilt, and conflict. Many of us see ourselves as controlled and defined by what we eat or what we refuse to eat. Yes, many of us have climbed the mountain of illusion, and through one door or another, disappeared into the house of rich food.

As a society we are also obsessed by drink. The problem is not the stuff in the bottle, but unhealthy patterns of misuse and abuse. Some people suffer from a disease called alcoholism. Excellent help is available if they will accept it. Others simply drink irresponsibly, whether because of inexperience or perhaps to blur reality. All of us are caught in a culture that sometimes tells us it's better to anesthetize ourselves with a substance than it is to recognize life's problems and work through them. It's no wonder, then, that many climb the mountain of illusion and disappear into the house of fine wine.

And, as a society, we are also obsessed with gambling. Gambling easily becomes a lifestyle when it is legal and heavily advertised. Lottery tickets at the convenience store, a casino just down the river, and now you can place a bet on your smart phone. How smart is that? Gambling leads to a reliance on the numbers and the laws of chance. The turn of a card can label us losers or winners. Gambling removes any sign of God's grace or even human effort. Many have climbed the mountain and disappeared into the house of gambling.

Gambling, drink, and food. Perhaps we have chosen one of these houses, or perhaps some other, up there on the *mountain of illusion*. However intense our pain, we will not, or cannot, find our way home. But someone senses our pain even more deeply than we do: Our Father in heaven. He finds us where we are and puts a small piece of food from home in our mouths. We recognize our foolishness, how we have left home and gone to a lifeless place. At the same time, we remember our true home. We smell it, taste it, and begin to see it.

The heavenly bread we receive in the Lord's Supper helps us come to our senses. We begin to recognize both our disorientation and our Father's invitation to return home. It may seem like a nice ending if we could then leave the mountain and go to live forever in a loving family. But while we still draw breath that time has not yet arrived.

What happens instead is we realize that our Father is with us right here on the mountain. Because he is present, we are already home. No longer is this mountain only a place of darkness and danger. Once we taste what he gives us, and open our eyes, we discover that even this mountain shimmers with the light of heaven. Home is where the Father is and since he is with us, we are home already. Again and again, we eat *the bread of life*, lest our eyes grow dim and we fail to see his splendor; lest our minds grow dark and we forget the joys of home.

There are no doubt millions of people in church today. They come for many different reasons. Some come out of habit. Regular worship is not a bad habit to have—mind you. It beats any other addiction! Some people believe that Christians come to church to pose and to preen. I doubt that very much. People come to church to be fed. We come because we have a hunger that nothing else will satisfy. We come to dwell in the Lord's presence—to seek the Lord's blessing—to commune at the Lord's Table. We come because we are hungry.

Jesus knew something about hungry people. He had compassion for a hungry crowd on the mountainside when he fed them (Matthew 15:32-39). He had only a little boy's lunch, but in his hands the boy's little lunch became food for a huge crowd. He fed thousands. Jesus knew that we all need food. He taught us to pray, "*Give us this day our daily bread*" (Matthew 6:11).

But Jesus also knew that we can fill our stomachs and still be hungry. We can eat in the finest restaurant and not be satisfied. We can live in the most elegantly appointed home and not know love. We can drive the most finely engineered car and find ourselves going in the wrong direction.

There is a very interesting verse in the Old Testament. Moses had called all the Israelites together. He said, "*[The LORD] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD*" (Deuteronomy 8:3).

I find that very interesting! "*...man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*" Is that really true? We know that we need bread to live, but do we also need the words of the Lord to live? We don't really have that kind of regard for words. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me," we say. Anything that can't *hurt* us probably can't *help* us either. If words can't hurt us, they surely have no power. But words *do* hurt us.

A father once told me that his young adult son ran away from home because he lost his job. He was afraid to face his father. When the young man finally came home, the father said, “That’s so crazy! I’ve never hit you. I might shout at you, but I’ve never hit you!” The father was basically saying, “My fists could break your bones, but my words will never hurt you.” Does anyone really believe that? Of course not! The young man was afraid of his father, because he knew his father was going to hurt him...by shouting at him...by making him feel like a failure. The father was going to berate and belittle him. The boy was already miserable, but the father was going to heap even more misery on him. Some of our greatest pain comes from words. Truth is, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words do REALLY hurt me.”

If words can hurt us, they can help us too. Jesus said, “*Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day*” (John 6:54-55). There are countless stories of people whose lives were turned around by the right word from the right person at the right time. We too have experienced the power of words. Gentle words *soothe* us. Forgiving words *heal* us. Encouraging words *motivate* us. If a word from a friend or loved one can rescue us, just imagine what a word from the Lord can do. He said, “*Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven*” (John 6:57-58).

By a word from God the world was created. By the living Word—sent from God—the world is fed. John records, “*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us*” (John 1:14). Jesus is the Word that comes from the mouth of God. Jesus is God’s *gentle* Word. Jesus is God’s *forgiving* Word. Jesus is God’s *encouraging* Word. Jesus is God’s *saving* Word. We do not live by bread alone but by Jesus who is God’s *gentle, forgiving, encouraging, saving* Word. Jesus says, “*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty*” (6:35).

In the Middle East bread is the heart of every meal. People don’t use forks. They feel that putting an object in their mouth defiles them, and by using a fork they would repeatedly defile themselves. Instead, they break off a piece of bread, use the bread to pick up their meat, and put bread and meat in their mouth. Without bread, they could not eat. Bread is the way to life. When Jesus said, “*I am the bread of life,*” he was saying, I am the way—the only way—by which you can receive all the nourishment you need to live.

This is Jesus’ clear invitation: To feed on him...and to live! Amen.
(Thanks to Charles Hoffacker for the story by Linda Fang)