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This week the imagery of Psalm 81 stirred within me memories of days when my children were babies. When the psalmist wrote about God inviting listeners to “open your mouth wide and I will fill it,” I recalled those times when I fed my children. At times they would lick their lips, smiling at the taste of the food on the spoon I placed in their mouths. Other times I would see the food ooze back out of their mouths, the taste not agreeing with them. Sometimes I would have to coax them to eat, flying the spoon around, saying, “Here’s comes the airplane; open up the hanger so it can land.”

When they began to feed themselves, sometimes as much food would end up in their hair as in their mouths. The food they didn’t like often ended up on the floor. I especially did not enjoy the days they ate peas, for they had more fun watching them roll around their highchair table and over the edge, which resulted in a mess on the floor.

Even though mealtimes were filled with messiness, I never stopped loving my children or feeding them good food, an idea that seems to echo in the psalmist’s words as he spoke words from God, “I

would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.”

The imagery would have reminded the listeners of the times God provided for them, when God offered them tasty food in difficult times. Generations earlier when they wandered lost in the wilderness, God promised they would find a land of milk and honey, a place of safety with plenty to eat. The middle part of the psalm, which we did not read, reminded the listeners of other stories of their history, and so it makes sense that the psalm begins with praise:

Sing aloud to God our strength;
shout for joy to the God of Jacob.
Raise a song, sound the tambourine,
the sweet lyre with the harp. (Ps. 81:1-2, NRSV)

The psalm recalls the times they were well-fed, when the people sensed God’s care, when they felt secure and nourished. The words continue to serve as an invitation to give thanks for what God has done, which we often try to teach our children, especially at mealtimes. Our family practiced giving thanks in prayer before each meal by inviting each of us to give thanks to God for one thing during the day. We would

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then end together by saying in unison, “And thank you for this food. Amen.”

Another family teaching their son to pray encountered a situation they hadn’t anticipated:

A little boy was asked to pray before the meal. The boy looked over the meal set on the table before bowing his head. He picked up his fork instead and began to eat. His parents asked him why he didn’t pray before his meal.

The boy answered, “I already prayed for this food; these are leftovers!”¹

How many times have we felt a similar way, feeling as though we’re getting leftovers, reluctant to give thanks? Or how about those times we don’t even think about giving thanks? For example, how many of you offered thanks to God this morning for the air we breathe? Some could reply, “Why give thanks for something so common?” and others may complain, “It’s just the oxygen that trees and plants give off, so why give thanks? It’s just leftover air.”

Leftovers. Aren’t they worthy of giving thanks? Without leftover oxygen, you and I would not be able to breathe, unable to live. Thanks for leftovers!

It appears that the people who heard Psalm 81 had fallen into a time of forgetting to give thanks, for God had fed them, guided them, offered teachings on how to get along, and had protected them. In return, some forgot all about God. Others forgot their responsibilities of caring for those in need. After all the years of God feeding them, now God was fed up with their lack of care for others.

We ran into an example of God’s disappointment with humanity while reading the book of Ezekiel in Bible study this week (at CCC). For several chapters we read how the people had committed terrible sins, but it became very personal when Ezekiel named their most detestable and destructive behavior. What do you think that might have been? I imagine you could create a whole list of terrible things: lies, murder, violence, abuse, child neglect, theft. We might even feel smug that we haven’t done anything on this list we have imagined, but Ezekiel said the worst thing was being proud and having plenty to eat but not helping the poor and needy.² When I asked how many of us have been proud, had plenty to eat, and had neglected the poor, every one of us raised our hands.

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If God was disappointed with people thousands of years ago, is God fed up with us today for the same reasons? Just like feeding infant can be a bit messy, sometimes our lives are messy too.

It's ok to celebrate and give thanks to God for our many blessings, that God has fed us, nourished us, and blessed us, even when we make messes, but when we take these gifts for granted and ignore those in need, I wonder if God ever becomes fed up with us.

While reading Ezekiel this week, that's the caution we heard—a warning that God was fed up with those who feel all smug and secure and neglect those in need, not only those who heard the words thousands of years ago, but those of us listening today.

Psalms 81 echoes this idea, for the psalmist also recognized that the people did not listen to God's voice. Ezekiel used the word שָׁמָע (shema) four times, a word meaning listen, hear me, pay attention. It's almost as though God throws up hands in frustration and says, "Listen up, folks. Why don't you hear me? You're going to do whatever you want, so just go

ahead. I can't stop you. You're not listening to me anyway, but I really want to feed you with the finest wheat and sweet honey from the rock, so please remember what I have done for you and let me love you. I want to protect you, but you are going your own way, feeling independent and doing your own thing."

When have you gone your own way, forgetting the blessings God has given you? When have you neglected caring for those in need? I could end with these questions, leaving us all hanging here, feeling self-conscious and a bit guilty, but that's not where the psalm ends. The psalm begins with celebration and ends with a promise, with the warning in between. It's a bit like a sandwich. The meat on the inside isn't very tasty, but the honey wheat bread on the outside is delicious, and God is ready to feed us. Open your mouths. Taste what God has prepared, and give thanks for God's many blessings, gifts that God invites us to share with others.

¹ Hodgkin, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, 721.

² Ezekiel 16:47-50.