

## **The Path to El Dorado**

Once there were stories of a great city somewhere in South America. Lost in a remote jungle, it was called El Dorado, the golden one, because the streets were supposed to be paved with gold. People who could find El Dorado would be cured of all ailments and perhaps live forever. Even the great explorer Sir Walter Raleigh claimed to have located clues to the golden city, but El Dorado never was found.

Fast forward three-hundred years and move to North America. Battle Creek, Michigan, to be exact. El Dorado had become the Battle Creek Sanitarium. People flocked there, not in search of gold streets, but in search of health. The Battle Creek Sanitarium offered baths, therapies, a spa, even electrical shock treatments designed to correct various ailments.

But Battle Creek and the Sanitarium became fixed in American history for something small and seemingly insignificant. The Sanitarium's director believed that whole grains were the secret of health. To concentrate the nutrients of grain, Dr. John Kellogg invented the flake, the corn flake to be specific. He created the first breakfast cereal, Kellogg's Corn Flakes. It seemed like the miracle food, the sure pathway to a healthy life. If we ate corn flakes, we would live forever. Or so many people believed. Sure enough, the corn flake was imitated, and the great breakfast cereal competition had begun.

Long ago we stopped looking for a city of gold. Now we chuckle at the thought of corn flakes as miracle food. But we are obsessed with finding our own, personal El Dorado. We are in constant, obsessive search of longevity, fitness, our abs in place, our torsos sleek, our skin blemish free. We are on the path to the El Dorado of health and well-being.

The obsession with personal health has become complex. There is a lot more than Battle Creek and flakes out there. There are countless claims and counter claims. You could live a life defined by smoothies and shakes, probiotics, vitamin supplements, natural this and organic that. Once in a while, though, a certain food becomes fixed in our minds. We must have it; it is the path to El Dorado, the road to happy and healthy living. The claims multiply and for a while this food can do no wrong. Lately, the champion food has been kale.

Who would have thought? Once, kale was worse than spinach – cooked until it was limp and lifeless, perhaps supplemented with bacon to console children forced to face it on their plates. Now website after website praises kale and lists its astounding qualities, without the bacon, of course. No more corn flakes for us. We've progressed to kale. What a wondrous world of health we have found! We must have found El Dorado.

Forgive my cynicism and accept my humility: I too am in search of El Dorado, looking avidly for the next incredible food, the best diet, the proper

supplements. It is an important pursuit, even a life-giving one for some of us. But let's pause from this frenetic obsession for a moment. Let's gain the insight faith alone can give, for us and for our world. Let's consider a basic question, one that puts us squarely back in the Bible, where we belong: we must ask, what is the bread of life?

It is hardly a new question. It did not begin with a mythical city or a Battle Creek sanitarium. The question is ancient, and it arose two thousand years ago in a synagogue in Capernaum. Judging from the remains of that synagogue today, it was large and prosperous, in the principal town at the north end of the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum was a trading center, and a center of new ideas, about health and faith. Still, for Jesus of Nazareth to appear there, and to claim to be the bread of life, that was remarkable. There was more to this than corn flakes.

Over the past several weeks we have moved steadily through the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. We have heard powerful stories, all about food. Jesus fed 5,000 people with scraps of bread and fish. Then crowds followed him even as he challenged them not to look for the bread that fills bellies. He began to speak of food that endures for eternal life. Still the crowds demanded signs. They recalled that their ancestors ate manna, a miraculous food, as God led them through the wilderness. What, they wondered, could Jesus produce to quench their hunger?

At the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus confounded them more than he seemed to answer them. “Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness and they died,” he said bluntly. It’s never good to speak ill of ancestors, but they were his ancestors as well. And he was making a larger point, about himself, and about us. If we listen, we will understand, and our hunger will be fed.

What’s at stake is hunger, but not the urge to go to the kitchen. It’s not even the hunger that prompts us to consider corn flakes or kale. No amount of food will satisfy this hunger; it requires quality not quantity. This hunger requires connection to deeper purpose, a satisfaction that no food alone can supply. The bread of life is not whole grain or gluten free. It is a living relation that drives us beyond ourselves and reshapes how we treat each other and the world around us. We can and we must be linked to truth and value that lies outside ourselves.

But what does it mean to say that Jesus is the bread of life? In part, it means that Jesus is our guide, our role model. We are on a journey, to a different and far more compelling El Dorado. Not a mythical city lost in a jungle but discovering a way of living here and now. No miracle food will take us there instantly there. Like a good diet, we must stick with this journey day after day. We must go where Jesus went, into healing broken lives, reconciling people driven apart, honoring each other and God’s creation as well.

For we need not, and ultimately cannot, journey alone. We were created to be part of something far larger and better than we ordinarily imagine. It is not a matter of doctrine, for the Christian faith is hardly encompassed by what is said or even what is believed. The bread of life is a way, a path, the pursuit of something better, meant by God for us. In part the image of bread speaks of that which is basic, that which we need for basic sustenance. In this case, it is not the product of a grain, however healthy. The bread of life is purpose, direction, hope, motivation. This bread gives us strength for the journey, strength whose source lies beyond ourselves. Just as we must eat, so we must partake of spiritual food.

Think of a skill you have acquired in your life. Like swimming, perhaps, or gardening, or something more elaborate or complex. You did not acquire that skill overnight. You tried, and you tried again. You might have given up, but you didn't. you stuck with it, time and again, you came back. You weren't always sure why you came back, but you did. And then something happened. By some means, which you may never understand, you began to get it. Your new ability had become a part of you. You gained confidence; you learned that you could do it.

In the same way, the earliest Christians found each other in the midst of their personal journeys toward faith. Part of their discovery was that they could not go it alone – they needed each other, and with one another they were fed spiritually as they never had been before. They were not of like mind; often their backgrounds

were different. The earliest Christians were very unlikely groups of people. But they had begun to understand what this bread of life meant, where it pointed, how they would be led. Their lives became marked by service, by prayer and study, by care even for people beyond the church. The church was not El Dorado; but it was a place to check one's direction and to find fresh clarity. Whatever obstacles stood in their path, the earliest Christians knew they could proceed. God was with them.

It became even more apparent when they shared a bit of bread and a sip of wine. The bread of life also is our common meal, the meal that has sustained we Christian people for two-thousand years. This brief repast is a miracle food. We find Jesus here, in this moment, and he points to where we can go. We must return here often, as the challenges of the journey increase. But the path of life awaits, and we can reach where we are going. For Jesus, the bread of life, is with us.

Don't settle for second best. Neither corn flakes nor kale will suffice. Only one food is good enough for you. It is the bread of life, calling you to a new and better way. Let us join in this feast which God has prepared for us, and be thankful.

Amen.

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