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Texts: Isaiah 55: 1-2; John 2: 1-11  
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### The Sacramentality of Everyday Life

One of the most astute and beautiful pieces of theology I have encountered over the last year or two is a profane and hectic television show about food and family, with a soundtrack to die for, called *The Bear*. I'm going to take a little time to describe it, and then I'll make the case for what it has to do with all of us here at FCCOL. It is, in sum, about creating moments of grace within a frenetic and merciless world of bills and commerce, of family discord and dashed dreams. It is about discovering how to exercise care, when both human beings and food are treated as fast, cheap, and disposable. Some of you have seen *The Bear*, I know, and appreciate its style. Others of you may pull it up tonight, assuming that since a minister is recommending it, it must be like, I don't know, *All Creatures Great and Small*, tender and cuddly and nice. Well, consider yourself warned. You may learn some new vocabulary words. But you may also learn something about ministry, and what it means to care for others, and for ourselves, amidst the tumult that often surrounds us. We are all called to be ministers in the tradition we belong to - the priesthood of all believers, it's called. I submit to you that a stressful show with a wide open beating and bleeding heart just might have the power to make all of us better ministers to one another, and to those around us.

Here's the gist of the story. Carmen Berzatto, sometimes called Carmy, sometimes called the Bear, returns to Chicago to run his family's sandwich shop. Carmen is a high end chef, having worked in Michelin starred restaurants around the world. His return is prompted by his brother's suicide. The brother had been running the restaurant, but the bills, stresses, addictions and family scars finally pushed him past the breaking point. Carmen brings a rigor and a discipline to food preparation that makes him more an artist than a cook. By contrast, the sandwich shop - called the Beef - is a mess. The physical disarray of the space, and the haphazard manner of its service, mirrors the psychic disarray of the people who work and eat there. The kitchen staff in particular is ornery, and set in their ways. They're a little like some churches I've encountered over the years (not you!): they've been doing what they do for years, and it's working just fine, thank you very much. They resent someone they see as an outsider telling them what they need to fix.

Carmen, however, is insistent. Some of the employees decide it's not for them. They leave. But others, when given the chance to explore, and to try new things, begin to thrive. A line cook begins to take pride in her work, keeping her station ordered and clean, while a bread baker loses himself in exploring the creation of pastries. But the single greatest theological moment arrives in an episode called "Forks." In it, an argumentative man-child, Richie, with deep psychic scars is sent to one of the world's most acclaimed restaurants to be tutored. He's cynical and impatient, and he doesn't appreciate any of the fastidious practices employed by the restaurant. And so he's made to polish forks, for hours on end, for days on end. He grows bored. He gets angry, angrier than he already is. He finds it humiliating. When he finally erupts, he's told that every single detail matters, because every single detail is a way of showing respect, care, love even, for those who make their way to that restaurant for a meal. To see Richie's face after that explanation is to see someone who probably had never experienced that kind of care in his life - ever - and it comes as a revelation.

Then, a day or two later, Richie stumbles into a quiet corner of the kitchen early one morning, and he finds there the executive chef of the restaurant peeling mushrooms. It is an extra little detail, she says, for each guest, that someone has exercised care for them. It's like finding a king or queen doing the dishes, or scrubbing the toilets. And so Richie, this wounded man-child, begins to ask her

questions. They're simple questions, and she speaks to him warmly, and patiently. And we watch as this brash, headstrong, and voluble man grows quiet, and his face conveys that something like grace is happening to him. He is, in truth, something of a fool, the last person to merit this kind of attention from this kind of person. But for Richie, it is as though, for the first time ever, he is made to feel worthy of someone's attention, worthy of their respect - worthy of their love. For a while, they just peel mushrooms together in silence, and then the chef is called to her duties.

That brief conversation is a revelation for Richie. It is something like a conversion. From that time on, he too begins to sense the importance of taking care of the small details in one's existence that convey respect and love to others. He begins to treat feeding people as a form of care, as a form of ministry, really, a way to convey to people seated at a table sharing a meal their own value through attention to the little things. It's an astonishing piece of television.

Here's why I think it matters. *The Bear* is diagnosing a culture in which human beings are often treated as disposable, not unlike the food we often consume. It makes a correlation between cheap and fast food with cheap and fast lives. It's not an accident, then, that most of the characters in *The Bear* are so angry, and so depressed. They're working people who have been treated as throw-aways, consumer items to be discarded, as so many within our own part of the world have been discarded, as many of us, if we are honest, sometimes fear we might be discarded. Carmen's intervention, his ministry if you will, is to insist upon the opposite. He insists upon the importance of detail in food preparation not to be fussy, but because it is a way of showing respect and care. It is a way of clawing back dignity and humanity for those who feel themselves to be disposable, which in one way or another is everyone in a commodity driven consumer culture. Because every tiny detail is in the service of delivering a kind of blessing, a moment of grace, for the person seated at the table. What *The Bear* is about, in other words, is taking the ordinary elements of life and making them holy.

That is, in our tradition the definition of a sacrament. Taking ordinary things, like water, like food, like our relationships, and helping us to see the holiness contained in all of it. The sacraments are a way of sanctifying, blessing, the ordinary material features of our lives, and showing that it's anything but cheap and disposable. Take communion, for example. I believe that ritual is less about the holiness of the bread and the cup, and far more about helping us to see the goodness that takes place, the glimpse of God that we can get, every time we sit down for a meal. It is a small but significant way of honoring, and blessing the bodies, and the flesh, that we are. It is an opening toward the pleasures of being alive, pleasures that we too often deny ourselves, sometimes because there just isn't time, and sometimes because, deep down, we feel like Richie - unworthy of such simple acts of attention and care.

It's telling, in that regard, that moments of pleasure, satisfaction, festivity, and perhaps even decadence, are a primary feature of the ministry of Jesus. Here I cite his very first miracle in the Gospel of John, the turning of water into wine. Why did the writer of John situate that miracle first? Wine, after all, has no particular use value. It does not quench thirst. It does not satisfy hunger. Unlike bread, it would not help to alleviate the struggles of the poor. The only real utility of wine is aesthetic. It delivers a sensation of bodily pleasure. It serves to create moments of uplift or celebration. At its best, it works to draw people together, releasing their cares, opening toward moments of connection. It can be misused of course, just the way freedom itself can be misused. But let us not diminish the fact that the first public act of Jesus is devoted to what might be seen as a trivial act, a fleeting sensation of bodily and communal joy. The first public act of Jesus is not unlike delivering a finely prepared meal in a restaurant. The guests are amazed at the sheer gift of it all.

This is not luxury for luxury's sake. I believe it is Jesus's way of saying that too often, human beings define themselves according to utility and productivity alone. Too often, we consent to having our lives stripped down to their bare essentials, allowing ourselves to be defined by our roles, by our responsibilities, by our obligations, by our use-value. That is to live on bread and water alone. Sooner

or later, something within us will rebel, for life is about more than utility, and productivity. It is about care. It is about the creation of small and fragmentary acts where dignity and worth are affirmed. It is about insisting upon joy, and upon communal celebrations in which we find ways to affirm the goodness of the world, and of our bodies, in all of our beauty, and in all of our messy decay. It is about the creation of fleeting moments of grace.

And is that not what, deep down, we come to church hoping to receive? A good choir anthem, sure, and a thoughtful sermon, yes, and maybe a sense of community too - those are important things. But those are all in the service of something more fundamental, which is what I have been calling "grace." Grace can mean receiving something that we don't deserve, the way Richie receives the careful attention of that regal chef, peeling mushrooms. And it may be that the love of God is precisely like that - suddenly finding ourselves graced with an attention and care before which we feel inadequate. I hope that what we do here can help you to feel that about your life before God - that in all of your messiness you merit that kind of graced attention from the Source of all that is. But I think grace can also mean a quieting of our inner chaos, a stilling of the hectic and turbulent voices within and without us. They are the voices that say we are valuable only insofar as we can produce something, make something, or be utilized for some other end. They are the voices that tell us that we had better hustle, and be profitable, in order to ensure that we aren't as replaceable as we fear we might be. Grace is to have such voices stilled. Grace is when someone intuits our needs and then meets them, just because. We come to church for a whole host of reasons, but I think above all, most of us come to church hoping to find something like that state of grace. Through the acts of attention and care we lavish on one another, we have the power to confer such grace.

But I think this teaching of the Christian church, which, whether wittingly or unwittingly, is upheld by *The Bear*, has another lesson to teach us here at FCCOL. Last week during David Good's memorial service and immediately after, I was acutely aware of how deeply his death has affected many of us. And not only his. *The Bear*, along with the entirety of Christian theology, is a study in what to do with our mourning. It is something that requires patience. It is something that can't be settled, or moved beyond, too quickly. It is something whose effects will continue to surprise us, in unexpected bursts of emotion. Above all, mourning is something that requires attention, and care. Perhaps changing water to wine is Jesus's way of saying just that: take care. If you follow me, life will be a little turbulent. If you follow me, there will be storms and stresses. And so remember to treat yourself well. Give yourself what you need, but sometimes give yourself something more than what you need. Take the water of your life, in other words, and change it into something that yields pleasure and joy. Take the ordinary things around you, and change them into sacraments - visible expressions of the ways you, we, are loved by God.

In this time of mourning, I hope we can do just that, for one another, but for ourselves as well. May we be able to lavish the kind of patience, attention, and care upon one another that we require in a time such as this. May we treat the ordinary things of our lives as the sacraments they are, signs of the grace that holds the world, and all of us, together. Amen.