

Breakfast of Champions (the parable of the Good Samaritan)

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I remember my brother Ted, his hair in its summer buzzed bowl cut, his toy soldiers arranged in fighting formation on his plastic placemat, staring at the box of Wheaties as he chewed reflectively, eyes riveted to the extravagant claims of prowess and strength the box touted, as he dug his spoon into the flakes filling his cereal bowl—the one with the picture of the train on the bottom, so that he'd have to eat the whole thing to get to the picture. If he ate this cereal, the Wheaties maker claimed, he'd be strong and muscular and those kids down the block wouldn't be able to tease him any more. He'd be like Superman! And Charles Atlas! And Johnny Weissmuller!

Nowadays, of course, because of truth in advertising laws, no one can make such grandiose claims. Although, reading and eating still go together—even more so; it seems virtually impossible to eat anything these days—unless you grow it in your own garden—without reading the list of ingredients and the illegible litany of additives and preservatives. But that's it: just lists, no promises. Just description, no transformation.

There is a long tradition in Christianity of reading being associated with transformation, however. The Gospel writers talk of taking and reading and taking and eating; Augustine, Bishop of North Africa, was

converted by a heavenly voice telling him to “take and read” the Bible and he chewed on its words, as he tells us, and in the Book of Revelation, John on the Isle of Patmos is handed a scroll by an angel and instructed to tear pieces off and eat the scroll. Reading is meant to be transformational, not just instructive.

In today’s reading, the Pharisee has been reading the Law. He tries to trap Jesus by posing him a tricky question. Jesus answers him in two ways. First, he says, what is in the Law? And then he asks (and this part is always overlooked), ‘how do you read it?’ How do YOU read it? How do you READ it? Is the Law mere description to you, lists and instructions? Or does the reading of the Law transform your heart? The Pharisee has been reading the box of Wheaties, but he has not been eating the breakfast of Champions because his heart has not been changed.

Look at how this story is structured. Everything comes in groupings. There is first *description*—what is in the Law, and then *response, or action*. So the priest sees the battered man and, because the Law tells him not to mess with anything unclean, he walks away. Description. Negative action. And the student of the law does the same. But the Samaritan sees the man and then, positive action: he takes pity on him. Not only that, but he goes to great lengths and some hardship to care for this man: transformation! The Wheaties is working! It’s not just cereal box claims, it’s not just advertising, it’s not just talking about loving God: he’s walking the walk, as the saying goes: he puts the man on his donkey, cleans his wounds, takes him to an inn, and pays the innkeeper money to make sure that the poor wounded man will receive his OWN breakfast of champions moistened with the milk of compassion.

And Jesus says to the Pharisee, after telling this story, ‘which one observed the Law?’ The Pharisee answers, ‘the one who showed mercy.’ (Note, by the way, that this is a tough story for the Pharisee to swallow—a big spoonful of Wheaties—because Samaritans were the lowest of the low. In ancient Israel, Samaritans were heretics, dirty dogs. To have Samaritan thrown up to him as an example of right conduct was very hard to swallow. So the Pharisee can’t even say, ‘the Samaritan.’” He grudgingly and elliptically answers, ‘the one who ... showed mercy.’) And Jesus says, ‘go and DO likewise.” YOU go, and do likewise.

How do you read the Law? How do you read the Law? You read it by swallowing it, digesting it, and being transformed by it. The Bible: breakfast of champions. It’ll change your life.

So eat your Wheaties.