

The Power of a Meal
Acts 2:43-47

Those verses from the Book of Acts that we read this morning are one of the most important little snippets of early Christian history that we have. In the first years after Jesus disappeared from among them, the community of people who remembered him and were intentional about following his path did a remarkable thing. They shared their homes and their meals, even their possessions: their furniture, their dogs, their cars. They were joyful; meals together felt like a celebration. Over potluck dinners, they remembered who they were and why they had come together. This isn't just a rosy re-write of what actually happened. Other sources of history—writers who were not Christian themselves—told a similar story. Outsiders were amazed by the goodwill they saw in that little community. It was unusual and it was compelling. “See how they love one another!” was the word-of-mouth message that made Christianity the fastest-growing religious movement in history.

So the picture of those first Christians really is quite remarkable. But not *every* moment of their shared meals looked like a Norman Rockwell painting. The Bible itself records some of their rockier moments. Not too long after they'd come together, they found that despite their best intentions, some people were getting left out. Widows, who were among the most vulnerable and needy people in the community, were not getting rides to the meetings. Conflicts arose, between Christians who had always practiced Jewish traditions and those who had grown up in Greek or Roman communities, who didn't know—or care—a thing about Jewish customs. Not everyone wanted to share *everything*. What would they do about people who held out some of their possessions instead of contributing them all to the community? Sometimes the problems were big, and sometimes they were about everyday, can't-we-just-get-along stuff. Paul wrote in his letters to the church he started in Corinth, “You have to stop fighting! If the people who arrive first eat before other people get there, clearly there won't be enough food for everyone! Yes, some people eat meat and some are vegetarians. I know some people drink alcohol and others think it's a problem. Are you going to let those differences drive you apart?”

Sharing meals—and food generally—is a mixed bag. It's where we share some of our best moments and some of our worst. Many of this know this from roommate experiences. Even people who you think of as lifelong friends can get under your skin if you're trying to share refrigerator space. I think now with great nostalgia about all those family meals when my daughter Stacey was living at home, but I also know that it was over dinner that most of our parent/teenager conflicts came to the surface and got hashed out (or not).

With all of its beautiful grace and honest messiness, it's a shared meal that identifies and connects Christians all over the world, especially today as we mark World Communion Sunday. Sharing food is the ritual, the practice, that Jesus *wanted* to be remembered in. We take into our mouths and our bodies a piece of bread that has been broken off from a loaf and juice that is squeezed from the fruit of the earth. Through the very act of swallowing—while crumbs are falling into the cup and that red juice is threatening to drip on your shirt—we are communing with the Holy One himself.

But notice that communion has never been a solitary practice. It's not something Christians do in the quiet of their personal prayer space. We practice communion when we are together, in community. When we eat this bread and drink from a common cup, we are also communing with one another.

That's not just a because-we've-always-done-it-that-way thing. Frederick Buechner says, "To eat any meal together is to meet at the level of our most basic need. It is hard to preserve your dignity with butter on your chin, or to keep your distance when you're asking for the ketchup. To eat this particular meal together is to meet at the level of our most basic humanness, which involves our need not just for food but for each other. I need you to help fill my emptiness just as you need me to help fill yours... We're in it together... [and that's] what makes us brothers and sisters."¹

When we do communion in church, it's usually a somber moment, and that's appropriate. There are hard memories that come with this ritual. The words we recite each time recall Jesus' death: his body broken, his blood poured out. The meal we re-enact happened as soldiers were already on their way to arrest Jesus and kill him. In The Great Thanksgiving, the litany that always precedes our eating, we recall our spotty history as a people of faith. Our ancestors the people of Israel wandered away; God came to find them, save them from the mess they were in, and bring them back into relationship, close enough so they could see and feel again how much God loved them. In the life and death of Jesus, we remember that God came to find and save the people again. *We* wander away; God *always* comes to find us, to give himself away for love of us, and to bring us back, that close, again.

That isn't just history; it's our story. It makes this table and this meal what it is today—a table where everyone is invited, where no one is turned away—whether you were born into the story or grafted onto it later, whether you got here through a legal system that welcomed you or you broke all the rules to find your way here. The story we tell every time we come together around this communion table recites: we are all broken. Every one of us has failed to live up to our potential, been hungry for the wrong things, disappointed God and ourselves. None of us meets the standards—whatever the standards are. So come on in. You too belong in here, with the rest of us broken people. We didn't have to decide who belongs; God already did that. And it turns out, God will let anyone in. *Everyone* belongs.

Last week, Jay Johnson reminded us that another name for communion is *Eucharist*—which comes from a word that means thanksgiving, or gratitude. There's a lightness suggested by that meaning. Gathering for this meal ought to bring not just pensiveness, but a smile—the kind of smile that comes when we recognize ourselves in someone else. Shared food is a reminder not only of Jesus' last meal, but of all those times he fed thousands of people with what had looked, just a moment earlier, like not enough. Miracles that prove in some way that there is always enough; that in God's economy, no one is lost or left out along the way. It ought to remind us of the central message of our faith: that even a ritual that focuses on brokenness is about wholeness

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words*, p. 228.

and healing. That somehow, life rises again, even when the earth looks scorched, even when we're convinced that a hopeless ending has already been written.

Last year at about this time, someone asked a bunch of Christian people who blog about faith to write about why they take communion.² One of the answers really stuck with me. It's written by Monica Coleman, who's a professor at Claremont School of Theology. She said,

Once a month, I gather with community—
some are friends; some I barely know.
we tell stories of how God brought us out of difficult times and into freedom.
This is bread for our journey together.
We sit at the table with people who have hurt us.
We trust that God will give us the grace we need to be more than we are.
We drink in these promises of God.
Once a month, I gather in community
to learn friendship, fellowship and forgiveness from what Jesus did.
...and this kind of work requires a meal.

Welcome to this meal, where you can find joy even in your brokenness. Maybe *because* this is a place where we acknowledge that brokenness is one of the things we share. Whoever you are, wherever you've been, whether you come with success or failure, whether you look like friend or stranger, or even enemy, there's a place at this table for you.

² At patheos.com