

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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May 7, 2017
4th Sunday of Easter
Psalm 23; John 21:9-15

Every Meal a Remembrance, Every Meal a Celebration

There's an awful lot of eating and drinking that takes place in the Bible. In fact, if you pay attention, you might get the impression that it's one of God's top concerns for the human race.

It starts in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, Genesis. God creates humankind, and then points out that all the plants and fruit-bearing trees are available for food. But, the story tells us, there is one fruit of one tree that is forbidden, but the first humans eat it anyway, and things go downhill from there.

There are famous meals in the Bible, such as the last meal the Hebrew people ate before they left Egypt. That one was so important that it became the center of an annual ritual, the Passover meal, repeated every year for millennia to this day, to remember what God has done. In the wilderness, the Hebrew people learned that God provides what is needed for life. Every morning, there was a kind of bread which fell like dew on the desert, and every evening a flock of quails arrived. When water was scarce, God made it spring forth from a rock. And so the people learned to trust God.

In the Gospels, Jesus and his friends are notorious party-goers. Though they travel through the countryside and call no one place home, there are frequent scenes at tables. "Zaccheus, I'm coming to eat at your house," shouts Jesus. "We're going to eat together today." He tells stories which culminate in feasts. "Kill the fatted calf and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again!" In the only miracle story told in all four gospels, Jesus multiplies a minuscule amount of bread and fish to feed thousands. He and his closest friends gather at a table the night before he died, where he prays and teaches, and impresses upon them that the bread and wine they are eating are powerful signs of his mission, his sacrifice, and their sustenance.

In other portions of the New Testament, we learn that the early Christian community always ate together when they gathered. Apparently, there were times that those who arrived early ate—or drank—more than their share, for they needed to be instructed that the sacredness of the meal called for good table manners. And finally, as if to demonstrate that God's trustworthy provision extends for all of history and beyond, in the very last chapter of the last book of the Bible, Revelation, Christ offers a welcome, saying, "Come, let everyone who is thirsty come. Take the water of life as a gift." (Rev 22:17)

So it's pretty clear that the Bible is concerned about the daily needs of human life on earth. Really, that shouldn't be a surprise, for Biblical faith arose in a people who lived in an arid climate in a subsistence agricultural economy, who spent a great deal of their time every day thinking about food and water. The surprising part is that in their daily bread, in their daily drink, apparently they met God. Their spiritual needs and their physical needs came together, as food and water taught them about God, and God taught them about the sacredness of food and water.

The same can be true of us, too.

We enjoy the luxury of clean, abundant water which flows from a tap. Thanks to our renovation project of 10 years ago, we now have 21 sources of drinking water in this church building, 21 faucets or fountains. We're spoiled. And when it comes to food, although the agricultural traditions of this valley keep us closer to our food source than most Americans, nearly all of us purchase nearly all our food at grocery stores rather than raise it ourselves. But though we are much farther removed from the effort

needed to grow food or collect water than our ancestors were, we still spend a lot of time thinking about food. We are fascinated with food. Most of us eat too much of it, and waste water while we're at it. But there is a blessing hidden in our habit of loving to eat and drink. There's a spiritual opportunity here. For just as in Biblical times, every meal is an opportunity to encounter God. Every meal is an opportunity to remember and celebrate that God is the one who provides.

One reason that the 23rd Psalm keeps its number 1 rating as "best loved" is that it assures us that God provides. If we are the sheep and God is the shepherd, God provides us with green pastures, abundant with food, and still waters, the waters of life. The shepherd/sheep metaphor is reinforced by the host/guest metaphor when the psalmist switches to "You prepare a table before me." The sheep were threatened by the dangers of the dark valley; the guest is fearful of enemies. But in both cases, God is present, God protects, and God provides what is needed. And what God provides is more than the basics. Guests are anointed with oil, and at this table, cups overflow. It's as if God were standing there with a pitcher, and every time a guest puts his or her cup down on the table, God refills it and wipes the excess with a cloth.

What could be a better symbol of God's goodness and mercy than an overfull table of good things to eat? I picture bread, butter, milk, honey, olives, and all kinds of fruit. Meat, poultry, nuts, grain, wine, and cool, clean water—this is the healthy Mediterranean diet that filled the Bible's world of banquet tables at weddings and on feast days, always a reminder of God's grace and generosity.

A banquet table reminds us of God's abundance, but even a simple meal reminds us that all we receive comes from God. So we can pray at every meal, as God's people have done for ages, "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of the universe, for you give us food to sustain our lives and make our hearts glad." (*Book of Common Worship*, PC(USA), 1993, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, p. 592)

Every time we sit at a table is an opportunity to remember God. And when we remember how important it is to God that we have what we need, we are likewise summoned to remember that God cares about EVERYONE the same way. So we are called to care about, and *do something* about the unequal distribution of food in our community and in the world. Christian memory is a summons to Christian mission, the sharing of the world's bounty so that no one goes hungry. God wants each person to have what they need, not because they happen to live in a prosperous nation, not because they've lucked out, and not because they've worked hard to earn it, not even because they deserve it, but because grace is God's nature. And when we eat in a spirit of gratitude, we grow in grace ourselves, for the sake of the world. So that we can truly be God's people.

And Christ's disciples. In this season of Easter, we are still reading about the risen Christ, who visited his disciples numerous times after he was crucified and raised from the dead. He ate dinner with some disciples on the first evening of Easter. We read that story last week. And on another occasion, he ate breakfast, a breakfast which he made, on an open charcoal fire on the beach.

It was an opportunity for celebration. The risen Christ was there with them, but the disciples weren't quite ready for it. They knew the stranger on the beach, the grill cook, was Jesus, but none of them had the gumption to speak up and say so. It was just breakfast, after all, just fish and bread by the sea. How could the risen Christ really be present at something so ordinary? And why would he be there for them, when they had let him down and denied him? It was the "mundane mingled with miracle," (s. Brian Erickson, 2015, *Feasting on the Gospels, John vol. 2*, p. 341, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press) holiness on the sand and rocks, grace given to sinners, ordinary food touched by God. It was breathtaking, yet so

everyday. Christ indeed was risen, he was there with them, he was cooking for them, redeeming the creation as he was blessing the simple daily act of eating.

“Blessed are you, O God, for you feed the whole world with your goodness, with grace, with loving kindness, and with tender mercy.” “Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed.” (*Book of Common Worship*, PC(USA), 1993, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, pp. 592, 593)

Isn't it marvelous that Christ gave us a sacred meal by which to remember him? Isn't it glorious that he just shows up among us to make sure we don't miss the most important meal of the day? And isn't it divine that something so humble can become something so holy?

For every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the saving death of our Lord Jesus Christ, until he comes. Every time we eat any bread or drink of any cup, we can remember God's goodness in giving it to us, Christ's continuing presence among us, and our call to gratitude to God and grace toward others. Every time we eat—that is, three times a day for most of us—we can renew our thankfulness, celebrate our salvation, and recommit our lives to the way of Jesus.

My friends, ours is a faith sees glimpses of heaven in the everyday. Ours is a faith which begins with our daily needs and promises God's eternal provision. Ours is a faith which cares about the needs of others, for it assures us of God's love for all. This is what Easter looks like. This, the bread and wine of communion, is what Christ looks like.

For he has prepared this table before us, in the presence of enemies and friends alike, so that we might experience and trust his goodness and mercy, and follow him all the days of our life.

“Bless us, O Lord, and these your gifts which we are about to receive from your goodness, through Christ our Lord. Amen.” (*Book of Common Worship*, PC(USA), 1993, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, p. 593)