

Message: “Hospitality of Eating Together”

I love to eat. Looking at my waistline, that’s sort of obvious, isn’t it? Like many of you, I spent a lot of years at church potlucks, picnics and celebrations. They all have a lot in common.

For example, church potlucks are usually held in the social hall.

There are long foldout tables loaded with homemade dishes, secret-recipe casseroles made with optimism, and sweet treats. You may feel like your plate needs extra structural support to hold all the goodness.

There are some things it’s good to know. First, there’s usually one dish that disappears in the first two minutes. Occasionally there’s a mystery casserole you may be afraid to touch because of THAT incident a few years ago. And there are Jell-O creations which may come in glowing neon colors with suspicious floating elements. Beware.

Potlucks and picnics are famous for a mix of Christian friendship and hilarious, unforgettable surprises. There are a few unwritten rules about how things go:

- Always praise the food with a smile, even if it tastes like pure sadness;
- Never take the final deviled egg unless you’re ready for a spiritual throwdown; and
- Always look for the label on the crockpot before asking around to find out who cooked it.

I’m sure you’ve guessed our habit for this week: show hospitality by eating together. Now, if you grew up in the church, this seems obvious. You’ve been there, done some of that. But the world has changed. Many families are so busy, the idea of sitting down and sharing a meal together may be more hope than reality.

Yet college student Erin Speak asks, “Why do people love to eat together?”¹ It’s happening more often on campus and beyond. She says, eating together brings subtle benefits everyone can enjoy from even one shared meal. The conversations started while sitting at a table with close friends or family help build a sense of community with those sitting around you.

¹ <https://waltonian.eastern.edu/opinion/why-do-people-love-to-eat-together/>

Whether it's telling jokes or serious discussion, sharing meals enhances communication among those at a table. Gathering together can make everyone feel comfortable when engaging in conversation.

And feeling comfortable helps reduce stress and increase resilience, giving us self-confidence. According to a survey by the American Heart Association, “91% of parents notice their day is less stressed when they share family meals together.”²

Good communication makes us feel like we're part of the group.

The exchange happening around a table can create memories which last a lifetime. And, while social benefits are important, the relationship between the diners and food becomes healthier and more favorable, too.

How so? Social media presents an image of what a “normal” amount of food is for a meal. This may create a misinterpretation of what a healthy lifestyle looks like. With those at your table, you can discover the benefits of eating what feels right for you, not what you think you should be eating due to peer pressure.

This includes eating alone. There's nothing wrong with it, so there's no need to feel self-conscious. We shouldn't judge anyone for dining solo.

The hospitality of eating together is something we do subconsciously, but it helps us grow as humans by gaining social and stress management skills as we interact with people, particularly as we get older. We're not just focused on our own growth. We're also inspiring growth in our companions during these short conversations around the table.

Eating together can be a feast of love. And it can bless us, one person at a time. This reminds me of cranky old Emperor Julian. One of his pet peeves about Christians was their habit of a surprising form of hospitality. You got it, Julian complained about the Christians' so-called love feast. Like many of us, he seems to have been confused about what the gathering was and what the people did together.

So, what is a love feast? Those of you who are familiar with our Wesleyan heritage have heard the phrase. But it's a bit unclear, too. Is there one way to do it, or are there different ways of carrying it out?

² *Ibid*

Well, to begin with, we aren't usually referring to communion, also called the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist. They were probably part of the original love feasts. And we know the Corinthians were practicing a communal meal as part of the weekly habit, because Paul chastises them for doing it so selfishly and poorly (1 Corinthians 11:17-34).

The early Christians focused so much of their lifestyle and ministry around the table that observers like Julian were confused. Pliny the Younger, a Roman governor in what is now Turkey, wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan asking for advice. He reported Christians would meet early in the morning on a set day to "sing to Christ, as to a god." Later the same day, they'd gather to eat food, "ordinary and innocent food."³

This rhythm developed into a standard practice for the early Christians. They'd celebrate communion in the morning and the love feast, showing hospitality by eating together, in the evening.

This practice continues today. I once spend several months in Bangalore, India. While I was there, I occasionally worshipped with a local church. They'd spend three hours in worship in the morning, take a break and then return at 3 pm for a communal meal and sharing.

My point is this: eating has been a central part of our practice since the beginning of our movement. And not only eating sacramentally, as in communion, but eating as a way to express love to all.

Eating together can be seen as a *theological* practice. It mirrors the character of our God. As Janice Price of the Church of England says, "Hospitality, as the mutual indwelling - one with another, becomes the [mode], as those in the life and mission of God meet and receive from each other... Hospitality is an attitude of the heart which is about openness... This mirrors the hospitality of the Trinity as God chooses openness through the Incarnation and subjects themselves to the created order... It's about [gathering and appreciating] our common humanity and meeting our emotional, spiritual and physical needs with generosity. As such it mirrors the activity of God towards creation."⁴

In short, this is a way to walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

³ Michael Frost, *Surprise the World*, NavPress, 2016, p. 42

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 43

English pastor and author Tim Chester once posed a question:

How would you complete the following sentence:

“The Son of Man came _____”?

There are three ways Jesus completes it. Two are well known and one may be surprising:

- “*The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost*” (Luke 19:10, ESV).
- “*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mark 10:45, ESV).
- “*The Son of Man came eating and drinking*” (Luke 7:34).

Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man, which is how he identifies with us, his mortal siblings, not just in spiritual, but real and practical ways. Jesus tells us why he came in the first two verses, to search for us and save us. But he tells us how he came in the third.

And how did Jesus come? He came eating and drinking. The one thing Jesus told us to do every time we get together is to eat. Think about it. It’s a practice he followed often and fruitfully.

Now Jesus’ detractors regularly accused him of being a drunkard and a glutton (Luke 7:34). Jesus was neither, but his habit of eating and drinking with the marginalized gave his enemies plenty of ammunition.

So, when Jesus gave his first followers something to remember him by, what was it? Remember? “And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘*This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me*’” (Luke 22:19). The “drunkard” and the “glutton” instructed his followers to eat and drink in remembrance of him and the relationship and life we share through love.

What a beautiful reversal of our understanding of hospitality!

And then, in the story of the good Samaritan, Jesus shows us how much further love and hospitality can go. Back to our habit...

The table is a primary symbol of the Christian gathering.

It represents hospitality, inclusivity, generosity and grace. Sometimes it may seem like the primary symbol is the pulpit or a screen. It’s like we somehow think Jesus said, “Every time you meet together, listen to a sermon and sing.”

Obviously, I'm not against sermons or singing, but if we took Jesus' life seriously, we see the table is a better metaphor for Christian worship.

Here's how theologian, and professional chef, Simon Carey Holt describes the table:

"It's through the daily practice of the table that we live a life worth living. Through the table we know who we are, where we come from, what we value and believe. At the table we learn what it means to be family and how to live in responsible, loving relationships. Through the table we live our neighborliness and citizenship, express our allegiance to places, [spaces] and communities, and claim our sense of home and belonging. At the table we celebrate beauty and express solidarity with those who are broken and hungry."⁵

The invitation to share a table is a profoundly meaningful one in every culture. I invite you to foster the habit of eating with three people each week. You won't need to add much to your already busy schedule. You already eat three times a day. That's twenty-one meals a week. I'm simply asking you to bring another person to your table for three of those. Or, if you want, you can bring three people to your table for one meal. Your meal can be a dinner, breakfast, lunch or even just coffee and a donut. Just sit across a table from three people, and... talk.

The table is the great equalizer in relationships. When we eat together, we discover the common humanity of all people. We share stories. And hopes. And fears. And disappointments. People open up to each other. And we ourselves can open up to share love and maybe our faith in Jesus. As Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford say,

"Sharing meals together on a regular basis is one of the most sacred practices we can engage in as believers. Hospitality is a wonderful opportunity to extend the kingdom of God. We can literally eat our way into [heaven]! If every Christian household regularly invited a stranger or poor person into their home for a meal once a week, we'd literally change the world by eating!"⁶

⁵ *Ibid*, pp.46-47

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 47-48

Now, it may be easier for you to invite people to our social time after church, or Bucks-A-Burger, or one of our sing-a-longs. That's a good start, but don't neglect hospitality during the week. Consider inviting not only well-mannered Christians, but unbelieving neighbors and the poor.

And then there's this: you can reciprocate when your neighbors invite you to their homes. That's hospitality, too. This raises the question about whether our presence may affirm values we disagree with.

Jesus is our example in this. In his time, a person wouldn't eat with someone of a different social standing, and certainly never with someone of a different religion. For example, Jews eating at the table of Gentiles, or Jews and Samaritans doing much of anything together was unheard of.

Jesus turned this practice on its head. He sat at table with sinners, not as an affirmation of their sins, but to offer mercy and grace. In a world where the marginalized are condemned, Jesus' openness is irresistible.

What better habit for us to learn as those who follow in Jesus' footsteps? May we learn Jesus' way, offering hospitality by eating together, and then see what beauty flowers from it.

Let us pray ...

Group Practice

How did your blessings go this week? And did you pray for anyone?

We're taking a moment to learn and practice a good, new habit together. This will help us improve our health, happiness and life.

We began by choosing a very small habit you'd like to have. Next, we learned to increase our habit in very small ways. As we build our habits, we then break them into chunks.

If you continue adding 1% each week, then you'll find yourself increasing quickly within 2-3 months. It's important to keep each habit reasonable and the steps small, so you can maintain momentum and make the behavior as easy as possible to accomplish.

For example, if your goal is 20 minutes of contemplative prayer or meditation, try building up to two 5-minute sessions, then two 10-minute sessions, and so on.

This week's practice: Keep blessing 3 people. And eat with 3 people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church. You can invite them to one meal or break it up anyway you want. You can invite them to meet you and your friends, if this helps.

Let's take a moment to practice. Close your eyes or soften them. Take a couple of deep breaths. Imagine yourself in the presence of the Spirit. Give thanks. [pause]

Ask God to show you who you might invite for a meal or snack. [pause]

Now imagine someone at church. Ask God how you might invite them to join you for a meal. [pause]

Let's stretch a bit and imagine someone you don't know well, perhaps a neighbor. Ask God how you might invite them to join you for a meal. [pause] Open your eyes and return to this moment.

Gracious God, thank you for life and the many ways you bless our lives. Thank you for Jesus, who showed us by example how to walk with you. Guide and direct our steps as we learn new habits. Walk with us as we seek to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. In his name we pray, amen

Luke 10:25-37 (CEB)

Then an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. He said, “Teacher, what must I do to get eternal life?”

Jesus said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you understand from it?”

The man answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.’ Also, ‘Love your neighbor the same as you love yourself.’”

Jesus said, “Your answer is right. Do this and you will have eternal life.”

But the man wanted to show that the way he was living was right. So he said to Jesus, “But who is my neighbor?”

To answer this question, Jesus said, “A man was going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Some robbers surrounded him, tore off his clothes, and beat him. Then they left him lying there on the ground almost dead.

“It happened that a Jewish priest was going down that road. When he saw the man, he did not stop to help him. He walked away. Next, a Levite came near. He saw the hurt man, but he went around him. He would not stop to help him either. He just walked away.

“Then a Samaritan man traveled down that road. He came to the place where the hurt man was lying. He saw the man and felt very sorry for him. The Samaritan went to him and poured olive oil and wine on his wounds. Then he covered the man’s wounds with cloth. The Samaritan had a donkey. He put the hurt man on his donkey, and he took him to an inn. There he cared for him. The next day, the Samaritan took out two silver coins and gave them to the man who worked at the inn. He said, ‘Take care of this hurt man. If you spend more money on him, I will pay it back to you when I come again.’”

Then Jesus said, “Which one of these three men do you think was really a neighbor to the man who was hurt by the robbers?”

The teacher of the law answered, “The one who helped him.”

Jesus said, “Then you go and do the same.”