

Matthew 26: 26-30
(The Legacy of) A Simple Meal Around the Table
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A few years ago, pollster George Barna conducted a national survey asking simply, "What is the phrase you most long to hear?" The overwhelming answer was rather predictable: "I love you." In a solid second place was "I forgive you," also not surprising. But the third most longed-for phrase took me a bit by surprise: "Dinner is ready!" As the one who is the cook in my house, I am the one who says it. But in all honesty, I love to hear it, and then get to the task at hand: eating.

Food and drink are important to us. They keep us alive. They nourish us. They give us strength to tackle the tasks of everyday life. They are essential to beating hearts, moving muscle, growing hair, and an active mind. Food holds body, mind, and spirit together.

The Bible is full of references about food. In the beginning of our story God presents humanity with a menu: "The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food (Gen. 2: 8-9). Along the way, God our Creator feeds the Israelite lost in the wilderness, provides food for poor widows and wandering prophets. God feeds them so they have the strength to fulfill the tasks set before them.

And when we get to Jesus and food, the story gets even more amazing. One of the first miracles Jesus performs in the gospel of John is turn water into wine at the wedding of Cana. He turns perhaps 120-180 gallons of water into a quality vintage. Or remember the feeding of the five thousand? Jesus gives out bread; on a massive scale.

Jesus is known for loving a good party, so much so that his enemies call him a glutton and drunkard. And he eats with anyone who invites him to the table; rich rulers and poor peasants; he

eats with people of questionable reputations or in despised professions. He takes many meals with his disciples wherever their ministry takes them.

But when Jesus broke bread the way he did at the Last Supper, food took on a different meaning. First, it must have been a rather bewildering event for the disciples. There was little time to reflect on it as it was followed immediately by his betrayal, suffering and death.

Food played a role even after his death. When he revealed himself in the 'breaking of bread' to the two disciples at Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35) and when he provided a breakfast of bread and fish for the disciples on the shores of Lake Galilee (John 21:1–14), perhaps he was teaching them in a very visual way that when they had a meal in memory of him, then he would be with them as the Risen One.

Or, perhaps after the coming of the Holy Spirit, one of the disciples was inspired with the memory of Jesus' instruction at the Last Supper, and said to the others, "Do you remember that when we had that last meal on the night he was betrayed, after he broke the bread and blessed the cup, he said, 'Do this in memory of me'? Come on, let's do it."

What provoked the disciples to begin celebrating a meal in memory of Jesus is a 'missing link' in the history of the Eucharist in the early Church. All we know is that they began to celebrate the Eucharist ('the Breaking of Bread') very soon after Pentecost. Immediately after he tells us about the coming of the Holy Spirit and Peter's preaching to the people, Luke writes, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to *the breaking of bread* and the prayers." (Acts 2:42)

What is the point of all this food talk and table fellowship in the Bible? What is the meaning and legacy of this Communion meal we celebrate here in church?

The point is that food isn't just fuel. It's not just a mechanism for sustaining us for ministry. **It's gift, generosity, grace.** God provided from the very beginning for God's creation. When Jesus gave thanks and broke bread he affirms that food is to be received as a gift from God. Food matters as matter. It's a physical substance, and part of God's good world. But it means so much more.

Who is invited around the table matters as well. Meals are a powerful of expression of welcome and friendship in every culture. This is why Jesus' meals are so significant – they embody God's grace and enact God's mission.

Jesus, for the most part, ate with outsiders, tax collectors and sinners. For him, there were no right or wrong people invited to the table, but the ones who needed to be there to feel God's grace, love, forgiveness, friendship, community, and welcome in their lives.

Eating and sharing food is much more than a physical exercise especially as we gather around this table. There are so many spiritual meanings in the act of eating around and sharing of our table that it would be hard to fit them all into one sermon. Here are some of the meanings.

Those of us who claim Christ as our Lord find ourselves being fed by Christ's own presence in this meal that we call communion, and it is in that feeding that we are participants in the spiritual life and the ministry of Christ.

God is reaching out to us, providing a way for grace, and love, and forgiveness, opening the doors for the holy to live among us: again and again and again. You can't get much closer to something than when you eat of it. Taste, smell, and sight remind us, tell us, about who God is. It has been like this from the beginning . . . I can imagine the rich earth that produces fruit as described in those early chapters of Genesis. I can hear the stories of people gathering around food and the promise of a land "full of milk and honey."

I can also hear the prophetic call for us not to forget about those who hunger . . . after all God has never forgotten, has always provided. And neither should we

In our eating and our drinking we too participate in this long story of a God who "feeds" and a people who serve; in a God who gives of God's self and a people who follow in the way. No wonder those of us who participate in the eating of the bread of life and this cup of the new covenant are participating in something more!

So those of us who partake in these elements, do so at our own peril:

We cannot eat of this bread and forget.

We cannot drink from this cup and walk away.

We cannot eat of this bread and drink from the cup and go on with life as usual.

In fact, when we eat and when we drink, when we become part of the central activity and posture of our life together, the central reason for our gathering--we too are saying that God's will for all of us, and all the world, is to be restored, saved, healed, made whole! No "devotional" practice here, or a pious "memorial" of some far, distant, reality. Instead we come to the "bread of life" again and again with the promise that God will come, that the spirit we are calling will show up, that the claim that we make will be made present, that you and I will find ourselves part of a new reality, transformed into God's own, pushed, propelled, into the reality of God's kingdom in the world.

Let us not just be the recipients of God's grace, love, and forgiveness in this Meal but let us find ways to become God's "Bread of Life" in this world. It would allow us to find common ground with each other rather than paying attention to the things that separate us, that exclude others, that close doors, and that questions God's image in others.

Eating assumes that we are hungry, that we are in need of sustenance.

Part of the challenge of the Christian life is the recognition of our dependence and our interdependence. Part of the challenge is to recognize that once we are fed we are called to feed others. Part of the challenge is to recognize that there are many around us that go each day, every day, without the sustenance needed – food, opportunity, support, love, friendship, community, and our ability to do something about it.

What we have been given by Jesus and the disciples is more than a simple meal. It is life; it is our identity, it is about faithfulness and grace and love and forgiveness; it's a call and a ministry to continue; it's our future together as a Community of Christ.

So before we go out into the world and be the followers that Jesus needs us to be, we are invited to this table because "Dinner is ready!" Amen.