

“Eating Well”

1 Corinthians 11: 23-26

Sunday, September 13, 2015

Rev. Heike Werder

The Congregational Church of Needham

One of the joys of traveling for me is to try different foods of the places and regions I visit. I am quite happy just to sit in a café or restaurant, do a little people watching and eat my way up and down the menu while my spouse is happiest climbing every tower or exploring every ruin, even the fake ones.

When I am not traveling, I love to watch travel shows – exploring new places with everyone’s favorite Rick Steves on PBS or tuning into the Travel Channel to watch Anthony Bourdain go catfish fishing with his bare hands or Andrew Zimmer eating one too many bugs – covered in chocolate or not.

In the spring of this year, my spouse DVR-ed a different kind of travel/cooking show for me from the Travel Channel called “Breaking Borders.” The concept seemed simple yet very challenging: to bring people together to eat a delicious meal prepared by a chef. That is the easy part. But the places chosen for the meal were the world’s conflict hot spots and the people invited to sit around the table to eat were on opposite ends of each conflict.

Journalist Mariana van Zeller and Chef Michael Voltaggio teamed up in the “hope that good food shared in a hospitable setting might help enemies find common ground.” (NYTimes, March 13, 2015, Neil Genzlinger)

The first show dealt with the “Mother of all Conflict” - Israel and Palestine. The place chosen for the meal was a vineyard in occupied territory, and the guests invited were the vineyard owners and another couple that had settled in Palestinian territory, a Palestinian book store owner struggling to keep his store open, the General Director of “Peace Now,” a pro two-state solution organization, and

Mariana and Michael, chef and journalist. The delicious meal was placed on the table. First they ate and then they talked.

“It’s amazing how people talk more freely around a dinner table. Food always unites, even where war divides,” said van Zeller. “What we found at the center of each of these conflicts are people with their own truths to tell. The series is a wild ride – rich with stories of war, food, tears, laughter, fear, bravery and survival.” (www.thewrap.com; article by Tony Maglio, Jan. 15, 2015)

There are 13 episodes of this series and you can watch them online. The show takes you to places like Cyprus, Cambodia, Rwanda, Cuba, Egypt, and Northern Ireland, to name just a few, places that were and still are hot spots of conflict.

“Food always unites, even where war divides” Mariana van Zeller says. Certainly we are not at war, but, we know that we are not in a peaceful place at this moment in time. As we re-gather as a community of faith after our summer break, many are aware that there is conflict going in our midst that is challenging us. Some might think it has divided our “house”.

I am quite certain that there are all kind of thoughts and emotions swirling around in people’s heads and hearts – ranging from sadness, anger, confusion, or simply wondering what is going on. Some might feel a little lost. Some might feel eager to embrace the challenges that lie ahead of us. Some might be very passionate about the issues, others just hope that there will be a worship service and good music.

To be sure we will have opportunities in the upcoming weeks to share with one another our thoughts and feelings, “to tell our truths”, which I hope, trust and pray will lead us to figuring out where we need to go and want to go as a community of faith. It might be a bit of a “wild ride” but if Israelis and Palestinians, Irish Catholics and British Anglicans can sit around the table, share a meal, and talk, so can we.

So, I am very grateful that on this first Sunday back, Christ’s table is set for us, all of us. For 2000 years Christian communities have gathered around this table not just to remember Jesus and how he

showed us how to live life abundantly, even when that meant losing life for the sake of others, but to show us that the Christ-like life is lived and experienced in community around this holy table.

In our passage this morning the Apostle Paul reminds the Christian community in Corinth of that. Digging deeper into their story, we find out that when the Lord's Supper was celebrated in the first-century church, it was observed as part of an actual meal that believers ate together.

They ate to satisfy normal hunger, but at some point in the meal, they shared some bread and wine, probably along with prayer, to make the symbolic connection to Jesus' last meal. In fact, we surmise from reading the text, that the meal itself was something like a potluck dinner, with each family bringing some food.

We also learn from the context that some Christians there in Corinth were better off financially than others, and thus they had the resources to bring better food to the meal. Less-well-off people brought what they could, but it was more common fare.

This led to a problem because instead of everybody sharing what they had brought, those who brought the better food wanted to eat that food themselves without sharing it. Paul points out the problem: "For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk" (v. 21).

The Corinthian Christians were missing the whole point of Communion. It isn't to promote a "look out for yourself" attitude but to unite those around the table to become the body of Christ, the community of God's beloved.

When we gather around the communion table, eating takes on a whole new meaning. We share this meal with people we might otherwise not share it with.

It is a way of opening our hearts and minds to seeing God in others as we eat. Our communion at church is a paradigm for all our eating. It is the quintessential meal that reminds us that every meal is with God. The communion meal is a way of getting us in touch with the power of eating well, of

letting food and fellowship loosen us up for conversation, for laughter, for sharing our sadness, for recognizing that everyone is God in human flesh. It is a way of nourishing our bodies and souls for today and tomorrow, for the road that lies ahead, for life abundant even in the midst of confusion. In that sense this meal of bread and juice becomes holy.

But the most important thing is that as we come to the table, we realize that it is not our table. It is Christ's. He is our host. He welcomes each of us just as we are today, forgives us, and returns to us newness of life. He calls us into this community of faith. What we are about to do here is a Sacrament. With the Holy Spirit at work, this is a window to see God, to glimpse the divine, to know in a new way the presence of Christ in this gathered community. It is an invitation to open our eyes and hearts to the Holy that is here and now.

Amen.