

Summary:

“Setting the Table,” the first in our series on Holy Communion titled “A Place at the Table,” by Rev. Jay Anderson at Church of the Master United Methodist, Westerville, Ohio, Sunday, October 6, 2019.

Detail:

Recently there was a story in the Columbus Dispatch Food section, maybe you saw it, about a couple who dine out every day. Neither of them cooks or even enjoys cooking, the whole idea of thinking about planning and putting together meals just stresses them out, so at least once each day they eat out. They keep dry cereal, microwavable oatmeal, or fruit in the house that they can have for breakfast, and bread and lunch meat around in order to make a sandwich, but rather than prepare or cook a meal, they have a whole series of favorite restaurants they go to, and will often divide a meal they purchase into a carry out container to have at another time. Lynn and I have actually encountered this couple at restaurants a couple of different times.

So that’s one model of how to handle dinner.

It’s a model that works for them.

I remember a child, that Mom would come home from work and make dinner for our family.

Occasionally we would go out to one of the local restaurants in Madison, or drive across the Ohio River bridge to Milton, Kentucky to eat at the drive-in restaurant over there, but usually Mom cooked.

And I remember, depending on when it was, that at one point we had a rectangular table with chrome or stainless steel legs and a formica

top, and at another time it was a round wooden dinner table. I particularly remember the round one because once, while my sister and I were chasing each other around that table, I somehow tripped and fell, spraining my ankle.

Among the dinner foods Mom would frequently prepare was fried chicken, a favorite of Mom's, and thus often a Sunday dinner component. She would also fry hamburgers or pork chops, and open canned green beans or corn or, heaven help us, lima beans or something like that to go with the main dish. Mom made a wonderful meatloaf and that was always my favorite.

When she bought one of those Veg-a-matic vegetables slicers, as seen on TV, we kids used to cut potatoes for her and make our own french fries rather than buying the bagged kind at the grocery. She would sometime make liver and onions - which I adamantly refused to eat, then and now - and there was always white bread on the table to slather with butter and sop up whatever needed to be sopped up.

My job at dinner time job rotated between setting the table or washing the dishes. We had these brightly colored melamine plates and bowls, and utensils with wood, or more likely simulated wood-like, handles.

And I would stand on a chair at the sink and scrub those plates and bowls, trying to get them as shiny as I possibly could, showing them to my mom to see if they were shiny enough. Dinner was, of course, an every day experience in our house, but I don't remember it being boring or mundane, as my siblings and I often had one of our friends at dinner with us.

One thing that always kept the mealtime interesting, especially as we all got older and would come back home for visits and dinner, was how my mom somehow lost the ability over the years to make mashed potatoes.

When she used to make them from actual potatoes and would boil them and use a potato masher to mash them, mixing in lots of butter and a little milk, her potatoes were great. But at some point, either because it was easier or because she could no longer use the masher and didn't want to use a mixer, she began using those boxed potato flakes. And that was the end of good mashed potatoes, but the beginning of a legend.

My siblings and I still, 24 years after she died, joke about how her potatoes were either the consistency of chunky milk, or conversely, could be used in place of Sakrete to set a post in the ground. There was no middle ground - they were either watery or spackle-like.

When Lynn's family gathers for dinner, which they do with some regularity, depending on whose house we're at and who all is with us, we'll all be around a common table with her dad at one end and her mom at the other, or we'll be gathered around multiple tables spread over a couple of rooms. And the food is always wonderful - and healthy - and it's loud and boisterous and fun - everything family dinner is supposed to be.

When it's just Lynn and I at home for dinner, on the other hand, we bypass the dining room table and usually have dinner on trays in front of the TV, where we can watch the news together, share about how our days have gone, and just relax with one another.

It's a model that works for us.

An expansive look at Scripture reveals that food, eating, and mealtime practices have a HUGE presence in and are at the core of many different Biblical stories.

In fact, the very first word that God speaks to Adam in Genesis is to "eat," as God gives him instruction about what he can and cannot eat from the garden.

In Exodus, the last things that the Israelite people did before escaping from slavery in Egypt was to have the Passover meal. In our series on the Lord's Prayer we talked, in the context of "give us this day our daily bread," about God's provision of manna - bread from heaven. The prophet Elijah famously blesses a woman so that her oil and flour never run out - providing her food for life. In the New Testament the Gospels are full of stories of meals, dinners, and feedings, and the Bible ends in Revelation with the archetypal story of the kingdom of God being like a huge feast at which all nations break bread together. Jesus spoke frequently in parables of wedding feasts and banquets.

And of course, one of the two sacraments that Jesus left us is to share in the meal that we call Holy Communion.

In our time, when the Passover meal is celebrated, the tradition calls for the head of the family or the rabbi to repeat the Exodus story, asking certain questions at specific times in order to elicit the story of God's liberating acts in a way that invites those around the table to remember who they are, whose they are, and that they, too, were once in slavery and were freed by God. The highlights of the story are

remembered in Psalm 78, where the people of Israel ask, “Can God set a dinner table in the wilderness?”

Psalm 78:17-20, 23-29

But they continued to sin against God,

rebelling against the Most High in the desert.

18 They tested God in their hearts,

demanding food for their stomachs.

19 They spoke against God!

“Can God set a dinner table in the wilderness?” they asked.

20 “True, God struck the rock

and water gushed and streams flowed,

but can he give bread too?

Can he provide meat for his people?”

23 God gave orders to the skies above,

opened heaven’s doors,

24 and rained manna on them so they could eat.

He gave them the very grain of heaven!

25 Each person ate the bread of the powerful ones;

God sent provisions to satisfy them.

26 God set the east wind moving across the skies

and drove the south wind by his strength.

27 He rained meat on them as if it were dust in the air;

he rained as many birds as the sand on the seashore!

28 God brought the birds down in the center of their camp, all around their dwellings.

29 So they ate and were completely satisfied;

God gave them exactly what they had craved.

But more than being a mere remembering of God's liberating presence in the past, the Passover liturgy is intended to be a remembrance, a telling of the story in such a way that God's presence at the dinner table becomes a present reality. In much the same way, our liturgy for the sacrament of Holy Communion is structured as remembrance of God's presence with us, and of the story of God's great acts of salvation leading up to God's becoming one of us, one with us, in Jesus the Christ.

The sacred meals of the Abrahamic covenant, the Sinai covenant, and the many seasonally repeating feasts found in the Mosaic Law were

intended to be evidence that God was among the people of Israel and was proving it by sitting down at a sacred meal with them.

The practice of hospitality in the ancient near East, going back long before Jesus' time and continuing to today, involved the notion that the guest in someone's tent or house was sacrosanct, treated with respect, almost holy. Hospitality or the lack thereof are key components of many stories that we find in both testaments of the Bible. Hospitality was a divinely inspired activity for ancient peoples, and it always involved shared meals and validated the dignity of guests.

So, it was against this Old Testament backdrop of sacred meal symbolism that Jesus extended table fellowship, even to those who were considered to be notorious sinners. In fact, Jesus employed a very intentional dinner strategy during his ministry.

New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan, of *The Greatest Prayer* fame, suggested that to watch Jesus during an average day would reveal him doing two things repeatedly: healing and eating.

In fact, Jesus' dinner strategy created many conflicts for him. In Luke 15:1-2, Jesus angered his critics because he extended a welcome to sinners and their friends to join him at his table. But we see the benefits of Jesus' dinner strategy in the story of Zacchaeus - who, while hosting Jesus for a meal was touched and changed by the words and love of Jesus.

And we can see, as Crossan points out, how Jesus used dinners and meals as an opportunity to both heal and teach. One feast-oriented teaching that Jesus gave at a dinner is found in Luke 14:12-

14, where he told his hosts, rather than invite only their friends who can repay their invitation in kind, to invite to their table the poor and those who cannot return the invitation.

The most famous feast-oriented parable, the parable of the Great Feast (Mt. 22:1-14) was drawn from a story in the Palestinian oral tradition of a tax collector named Bar Maayan, who gave a banquet for the city counselors; when they refused to come, he gave orders that the poor should be invited to come and eat the meal instead. These stories about inviting the poor, the marginalized, the least, the last, and the lost to meals, banquets, and end-time feasts reveal that Jesus saw the kingdom in terms of a large, welcoming, and open invitation feast.

Another interesting story that intensifies the great importance of hospitality, found in Mt 25, is the famous story about separating sheep from goats.

The story ends by opening the door to heaven only to the sheep - the group that cared for the sick, visited the imprisoned, and invited the poor to their tables.

In fact, Jesus' eating with sinners and telling stories about "the least of these" became the memory and template that inspired the ways and means of the first church.

So it is fitting that as Jesus came to what would be the end of his earthly ministry, he gathered his disciples for one final meal before his arrest, which happened to be the Passover meal, the meal in which Israel celebrated their release, their liberation, their freedom from slavery in Egypt by the hand of God.

And it was the full Passover meal - what we're familiar with in a modern seder. It was when, at the end of the meal Scripture tells us, that Jesus lifted up the bread and the cup and told the Twelve and the other who were with them that these two very basic elements of the meal - bread and wine - represented his body and his blood, that they finally understood what he had been telling them from the beginning - that God was present at the table with them and was offering liberation once again. So when Jesus instructed them to share that same meal often, it's unlikely that they would have, or did, understand it to mean that his words only applied to the bread and the cup, as in modern church practice, but rather to the entire meal. Jesus wasn't taking away from, reducing, or replacing the Passover meal, he was simply adding a new meaning for his followers to part of that larger meal.

We need only look to what his disciples did following Jesus' ascension to know that they embraced the vision of the whole meal that Jesus gave them that night.

After all, they had watched how Jesus' used meals and dinner as a strategy for three years - obviously they understood the vision he cast during this final Passover; they understood that they were given a call to gather others around the table, to eat dinner together often,

and to talk about Jesus and his teachings.

This was to be the manner of Christ's new church; this was how they were to invite others into relationship with Jesus. The disciples caught the vision, and their gatherings were now done in the likeness of the

Master's, around tables at dinnertime. It was only the later church that reduced this meal to only the bread and the cup.

There was something pleasing and engaging about these dinner settings. Professor and pastor Ben Witherington said, "Christian meals, including the Lord's Supper, had elements that worked against the prevailing hierarchy and stratification of society and were different from early Jewish meals." The meal vision that Jesus instilled exemplified the radical leveling that the preaching proclaimed: everyone would be served equally. Jesus' life and his continual welcoming of slaves, sinners, and despised tax collectors makes it impossible to imagine that Jesus would champion any meal setting except an inclusive, "come one, come all" dinner table. This, then, reveals why Jesus selected the Passover meal for his vision launch.

When Jesus took that final Passover meal to launch his vision for how his disciples were to be the church, he intentionally connected his meals to the rescue of the lost in the Exodus drama. Unless we understand the steps involved in the ritual by which God sets the table of fellowship for Israel through the act of communion, of community, we will not be able to appreciate fully the significance of table fellowship in the prophetic teaching of Jesus. Every Hebrew Passover celebration would culminate with the invitation to sit with God at the table to fellowship and receive God's blessing and favor.

The meaning of the Passover table was profound:

God has rescued us and now sits to eat with us.

Amazingly, Jesus instructed his followers to take that same table and its rich meaning of rescue and divine inclusion to the commoners, the sinners, the lost, the poor, the lonely, the despised, to you, and to me.

But before Jesus took the Passover meal to a new level, he also took the every day meal to a new place as well. In our scripture reading from Matthew, we have the story of what is called the miracle feeding, the feeding of the five thousand. We read this passage today and talked about this it a couple of weeks ago in another context, so I won't go into all of that again, other than to add this:

In this event, in this miraculous feeding, Jesus is setting the table - not only for this feeding of thousands of people, but also setting the table for what would come later. Often in this story, our logical, Enlightenment brain gets caught up wondering how (or if) this miracle happened, focusing on what we assume is some miraculous self-replenishing or reproducing loaf of bread.

Perhaps, though, the miracle on which to focus in this story is not five loaves of Wonder Bread, but that in inviting all of those who were gathered to sit together for a meal despite their differences, to share together in hospitality, that maybe they found, as John Wesley would put it seventeen centuries later, their "hearts were strangely warmed," and that they, like the little boy who offered his lunch, began to share what they had as well. Perhaps the miracle in this story is one of radical hospitality and the breaking down of barriers in the sharing of a meal in the presence of the Son Of God.

And it is that same, ongoing presence we remember when we say responsively these words to begin our communion liturgy:

The Lord be with you...

And also with you..

We begin this holy meal by not only acknowledging the presence of God with one another, but we also recognize, accept, and proclaim the presence of God in one another.

The Lord be with you...

And also with you...

These words serve as a blessing; a blessing for the meal as well as a blessing for one another.

Turn to another and both offer and receive that blessing with one another now...

In the coming weeks we will share in communion each week, and each week we will begin with a form of the this blessing of the meal and of one another, acknowledging the presence of God, the grace of God, the love of God given to all.

We will explore together the table practices and the reason we do certain things and don't do others.

We'll explore the theology of holy communion in general and our particular Wesleyan theology around the Eucharist in particular. We'll explore the various names for this sacrament as well what they signify.

But mostly, we'll celebrate the meal as the gift of fellowship, as a means of discipleship, and as the remembrance of Jesus and of God's presence through Jesus as we gather round the table - the table that God has set for all people. Let us break bread together.

Amen.