

Are You Hungry?

A Communion Meditation

Luke 9: 10- 17.

Sometimes table time with friends around a table is the best storytime. So, today as we prepare to be at table with Jesus, I have some stories. Some I've told you before, but I tell them today because they are so much a part of who you are as a congregation I love, and also because we need to hear them especially these days where the most vulnerable of our nation are subjected to hate and where half the human race, the female part, seems as discounted as ever. Today's sermon also serves as a foretaste of the theme our Worship Board has chosen for the Advent Season just around the corner: Coming Home.

Now to the sermon. A 1980s novel by Ann Tyler tells of Ezra, who ran a restaurant. All life long feeding people was his way of caring for them. He made friends with Mrs. Scarlotti who owns Scarlotti's Restaurant. He worked for her, and one day she turned the business over to him. Ezra tried various menus and formats. One day this idea came to him:

“He'd cook what people felt homesick for—tacos like those from vendor's carts in California, which the [regular who grew up in Mexico]

was always pining after; and that wonderful vinegary North Carolina barbeque that Todd Dotson had to have brought by his mother several times a year in cardboard cups. He would call it “The Homesick Restaurant.”

Hence the title of the novel: “Dinner at The Homesick Restaurant.” What kind of food do you get homesick for? I read that when Alexander Julian, the famous fashion designer, a North Carolina native, designed the new uniforms of the Charlotte Hornets their first season, he asked to be paid in monthly shipments of North Carolina barbeque. He may have made the same arrangements when he designed the UNC basketball uniforms.

I

Are your tastebuds beginning to water? Your memories? Food and memory go together, don't they? And the food you are homesick for has to do with more than taste. It has to do with place and time and the experience of joy or comfort or love. It tastes like home.

When you were young and feeling ill your mother may have brought you a special kind of soup, and that soup is still like comfort to you. What was your favorite meal growing up? I know one family where on the birthday of each of their children, they get to pick what meal they want Mom or Dad to cook. What do you cook when your daughter or son comes

home after being away for a while? What do you hope to eat when you go home?

I know someone whose grandmother was the most home she ever experienced. It was her grandmother's mashed potatoes that she was homesick for, and every time she went home that's what her grandmother made. And it was not just the taste she loved, it was the preparing of the mashed potatoes beside her in the kitchen, slicing, boiling, mashing the potatoes side by side. And when she put them in her mouth what she tasted was unconditional love, friendship, home.

I quoted recently someone who said that next to the *Odyssey*, the Bible was the “eatingest” book in history. I checked my humongous biblical concordance this week and counted the references to the word “eat” and its various forms: over 800 times! And that didn't count the word “drink” and “drinking.” I think something's up here—and it's not just about the body, it's about the spirit too.

II

Jesus spent a lot of time feeding people and eating with them. It was all a part of the Kingdom of God he came to bring. And it sometimes got him in trouble too, because he ate and drank with people not on the right

guest lists. There was a lot of grumbling going on among the gatekeepers of God's house—and God's love.

The feeding of the multitudes with a few fish and loaves of bread is remembered in all four gospels. You heard Luke's telling today. The day was drawing to a close, and the crowds which had followed him to hear him teach about the Kingdom were no doubt hungry. Jesus' disciples urged him to send the crowd away so they could find food and lodging.

Jesus said— we can't know the look in his eyes, or his tone of voice, no emojis in the Bible — “You give them something to eat.” They replied, “All we've got is five loaves of bread and two fish. There are about 5,000 of them! We're going to have to go to town!”

Jesus asked the disciples to help the crowd to sit down. Food was on the way. You remember what happened. He took the five loaves and two fish, and looking up to the heavens blessed and broke and gave it to the disciples to feed the crowd. He *took* and *blessed* and *broke* and *gave* the food, and all were fed and all were filled.

Then Jesus did something that Sue likes. He told his disciples to gather up the left overs! Nothing wasted! Jesus was extravagant in his giving and *frugal* too.

It must have been important for all the gospels to remember to the story to us. Not just the miraculous part of it, the *gospel* part of it, what it meant: God feeds us and cares for us. As our Davis Lecturer Obery Hendricks said of Jesus: in his healing of body, mind and spirit, in his feeding of hungry, in his care for the poor, Jesus was saying that *our needs are holy to God*, all of them. And as for the leftovers, twelve baskets-full collected by the disciples, Jesus was giving a sign about the abundance of the Kingdom, of God, like baskets overflowing!

The feeding is about all the things we are homesick for. Not just food, also love, acceptance, joy, companionship, comfort, community—and sometimes even hunger for God. Ever feel like there is a God- shaped hole in you?

III

I've told some of you this story. It's from a 1980's article in the New York Magazine in a series called, "True Tales From New York." The writer is Gloria Gonzales who grew up in Spanish Harlem. Here is her story about of a party thrown for Jose, a family member, coming home after three years in the Marine Corp, a story like one Jesus would have told.

Every family had contributed a home cooked dish and a dollar for beer and soda. Now, let her tell the story:

“Neighbors began decorating the apartment with crepe paper and balloons the night before, and someone had been dispatched to the local funeral parlor to borrow folding chairs.

The day of the party relatives arrived from the Bronx and from as far away as San Juan. Papo, Jose’s cousin, and I were posted on the stoop as lookouts.

A taxi arrived and deposited its passenger. Papo and I paid scant attention to the tall brunette in the off-the-shoulder blouse and billowing skirt.

It wasn’t till she screamed our names and swept us up off the ground in a bone crushing hug that we realized that the perfumed woman was Jose!

In a daze we lugged her suitcases up two flights of stairs, our eyes fixed on Jose’s ankles, strapped into stiletto heels, as he took the stairs two at a time while urging us to hurry.

With the music of Tito Puente in the background, Jose threw the doors open and announced, “I am home!”

The needle was pulled on Tito Puente.

“Me, Jose, the person has not changed. Only the outside. You are my family and I love every one of you. If you tell me to go I will. But if you find it in your heart to love Josefina, I would love to stay”

No one spoke. Everyone stared.... I stood in the doorway, still holding the suitcase, not daring to enter.

After what seemed hour—but could only have been moments—his mother stumbled forward and said, “Are you hungry?”

I was eleven. It was the best party I ever went to.”

It strikes me that that is the only question God ever asks as we come to the Table of Jesus, or maybe anytime: “Are you hungry?” The prophet from the Exile announced to the captives coming home:

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters,
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!” (Isaiah 55: 1)

It's all grace. What are we hungry for as we come to the Table? Justice, kindness, walking humbly with God?! Yes, we sing of these *every* communion service. How about this day? Home? Love deeper than we've

ever known? Or *respect*, respect of who you are, something too rare today, or every day.

The central character in a Frederick Buechner's novel, *Love Feast*, a slightly shady evangelist named Leo Bebb, moves from Florida to Princeton, New Jersey where he hopes to reach, in his words "the Pepsi generation." On his first Thanksgiving there, he throws a big Thanksgiving feast, a "Love Feast" for everyone left behind for the weekend, and for all in town left out, down-trodden, forgotten. He gave some words before they dove in: "The kingdom of heaven is like a great feast" he began, "a love feast where no one is a stranger".

Then he asked if they knew what would happen if they admitted their need and came to the feast. "Why what would happen is that we'd find out home is each other. We'd find out home is Jesus loves us lost or found or any whichway."

We're at the Homesick Restaurant again. And Jesus is the host, the host he always loved to be. "I've been waiting for you", he says, "Here's your chair. Come, sit and eat."