

“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?”  
October 4, 2009

If you are anything like us, our lives seem to revolve around food. One of the common questions Mike and I ask one another is “What do you want for dinner?” Actually, he usually asks me and not the other way around, since he does the vast majority of cooking around our house. We seldom have breakfast or lunch together, but when he’s in town, we always focus around what we’re going to eat for dinner.

You may have similar experiences in your household or at your place of work. For instance, The Garden’s lead staff goes to lunch each Friday to touch base, deal with issues, and think about new avenues to go down for us all. It’s always a working time, but it includes eating.

Eating a meal is an essential part of all our lives, because eating with others serves at least two important purposes: it supplies the needed nutrients for our bodies, and the time together helps us build relationships. I guess you could say that having a meal with another person nourishes both our bodies and our spirits. As M.F.K. Fisher noted, “Sharing food with another human being is an intimate act that should not be indulged in lightly.”

I’m not sure that’s always the case for many of us. In fact, with all the fast food establishments around, some of us quickly grab whatever’s at hand, giving little thought to something deeper that could be connected with the ritual of eating. And I suppose there’s a caveat imbedded in talking about how food nourishes our bodies, because it all depends on what kind of food we eat, and whether or not it’s healthy for us. Like Billy in a Family Circus cartoon, we sometimes ask, “Could I have something to eat that’s not good for me?”

However, I hope that isn’t a habitual thing for us, because sharing food with others provides something that we need and want. I read an article that Kent Nerburn, who holds a PhD in theology and art, wrote about the sacred quality of mealtime. He told about his wife whose day was long, but who chose nonetheless to prepare a meal, and have them sit down together to share it. She did that because of her conviction about the importance of eating together. Nerburn described his wife’s actions by saying, “Though she would not put it in these words, it is an act she reveres, a ceremony of the ordinary.”

Kent Nerburn then goes on to comment on the reality that we have wandered far away from the sense of a meal as a holy time. As he observes, the activities of mealtime like sharing the day’s happenings have a way of becoming special. He says, “Though it remains unspoken, even unrealized, our shared meal creates a bond among us, and for a moment, makes us one.”

What he wants us to understand is that eating together can be a spiritual experience, if we make it so, and it’s a ritual that dates back thousands of years, predating all organized religion. In his book *From Beginning to End: The Rituals of our Lives*, author Robert Fulghum says, “Since the beginning of time, people who trust one another, care for one another, and are deeply connected to one another have shared food as a sign of and a reaffirmation of their relationship.” It is a ritual, a valid tradition that we benefit by honoring.

Our Bible passage gives us an idea about how Jesus regarded meal times, and how he practiced his understanding of the sacredness of meals—a practice that was often criticized and misunderstood. Luke’s gospel puts it this way: By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, “He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.”

In the eyes of the religious who followed the letter of the law, Jesus’ actions were considered to be outrageous! Socializing with those considered to be outcasts, the unclean, the “sinners,” was an absolute no-no, but Jesus went about doing that very thing. Jesus appeared to prefer being around people who didn’t feign being perfect, but who had flaws, or who were outlaws to others. He partied and ate with everyone—the “down and out,” as well as the “up and coming.”

As Marcus Borg writes in *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, “One of his most characteristic activities was an open and inclusive table.” Sharing a meal to Jesus meant mutual acceptance, and being at table together meant entering a relationship, cutting across all boundaries that divide, rearranging all categories of class, race, type and gender. It meant everyone was invited and welcomed.

That’s the way I regard what the church commonly refers to as “communion,” and in some circles, “the Eucharist.” It is an open

invitation, meaning mutual acceptance, a universal welcome, and I believe that communion connects us spiritually, maybe in a way we do not and cannot fully understand. In fact, a Gallop survey conducted a few years ago connected spirituality, food and human relationships. Peter Farb and George Armelagos have said, “Food to a large extent is what holds a society together and eating is closely linked to deep spiritual experiences.”

However, I really don't think it's just the eating solely that links us spiritually; I believe it also has something to do with the mindfulness, the intention of the shared meal, that makes a difference. If the desire is for deeper connection, and not just grabbing a quick bite, then the meal is a lot more likely to have a spiritual dimension to it.

One of the most meaningful stories I know about the power of sharing food together came from three of my pastor friends who live in the Denver area. Two or three years ago, one of them started playing golf with a group of folks, and one of them happened to own a bar. In fact, it was considered by many the number one “dive bar” in Denver.

At any rate, during one of their golf outings, this pastor friend asked the bar owner what he was going to do on Christmas Eve. He told her that the bar stayed open late on Christmas Eve, because so many of his patrons didn't have anywhere else to do. They didn't have family, or were alienated from family; they didn't seem to have many connections at all, except there at the bar.

Upon hearing this, my friend asked the owner if he would be open to her and a couple of other pastors coming down after the Christmas Eve services and having communion and a brief service with the folks who were still there. He was a little hesitant, warning her that he wasn't sure how this would be received, but he agreed.

So the three of them arrived at 1:30 early Christmas morning, and found about 25 folks still there. They moved toward the pool table, set out candles, and invited those who were there to join them. Most of the patrons, not quite knowing what to expect, gathered round the pool table. One of the pastors read the story about the birth of Jesus; they all sang “Silent Night,” and lit the candles in front of them. And then they began to pass around the bread and cup, and they began to share—a sacred meal in what some would consider the “un-holiest” of

places, and there wasn't a dry eye around that table.

My friends were there until 4:00 in the morning, talking to the various individuals, listening to their woes, offering them care and love. They were modeling Jesus—showing mutual acceptance, welcoming everyone who wanted to be at that table. That was a holy time that has continued the last couple of years.

That's what we're going to be doing this morning—sharing a holy meal together. Like Jesus, we say that everyone is welcome. This is a time to affirm our relationship with God and with one another; it conveys trust and care for each other; it is a sign of our connection one to another. Regardless of the food or the place, sharing this meal together is holy and God is in it.

DECIDE HOW (BARB WILL BE GONE AT B&B, SO SIMPLE IS BETTER)...setup with this blessing, spoken together: “In this place we believe the finest blessing is fine companionship during a meal. With such company as we have no, we are blessed indeed. May God bless us all. Amen.”

SONG:

Close:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray we know the sacred place that sharing food together serves in our lives, and know that it can be any food, any place, any time. It is in the seeking that relationship with God and with each other becomes holy.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.