

Gather at the Table

April 9, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Luke 22:7-23

I would like to invite you to think about a favorite memory that you have that is centered around the table. Maybe it is an extravagant holiday dinner with family, or something more simple like a table in a coffee shop or a diner where you and a beloved friend shared a deep and powerful conversation.

If I were to be honest, I would be hard-pressed to pick just one memory.

- I remember large family reunions when everyone would gather together around a Chinese Hot Pot at New Years – an experience that I can only describe as part dinner and part game.
- I remember a season when my mom could not afford groceries, but she took out all her stress by tending to the vegetable garden in the back yard and furiously kneading bread dough. That year, a friend gave us a chicken as a pet, and for that whole summer we had fresh eggs and fresh produce and fresh-out-of-the-oven bread that joyfully sustained us.
- I remember backpacking trips during fire seasons when camp stoves were illegal and so dinner consisted of Ramen noodles and freeze-dried peas soaked for an hour or more in cold iodine-treated water. Fun fact – I had no idea until I started backpacking that iodine reacts strangely with starch and turns dinner blue.
- I remember two or three beautiful meals in particular that David and I have shared with friends, in which our friends rolled out the red carpet for us and poured deep love into every bite that we shared.

For my family, when I was growing up, dinnertime was sacred. It didn't matter how busy everyone in the family was. Extracurricular activities could wait. Church activities and choir and theater rehearsals and work obligations and school projects all happened – we were all busy pretty much all the time – but regardless of how loudly our calendars screamed to the contrary, there was always time to sit down and have a meal together.

And the funny thing is, it didn't matter in the least what the food was. The food sustained life; it kept our bodies in sync and gave us the energy to continue living from day to day. The important thing for us about that daily rhythm wasn't the meal. It was the connection.

Growing up in a blended family, connection was sometimes hard to come by. There was a lot of resentment and misunderstanding; brokenness and chaos in my family. Allegiances were formed; politics and custody games were played. Home did not always feel like the safest place to be. Dinner table conversation was often tense, or rushed. Sometimes it felt forced. And then other times, on our better days we laughed together

as a family and told stories and shared struggles and laid a few bricks in the foundation upon which our family could eventually feel stable.

But whether they were meals we *enjoyed* together or not – whether we laughed together and joyfully indulged in the food in front of us or we picked at our food and communicated in monosyllabic grunts, the important thing was that we showed up. Night after night after night. We showed up at our best and we showed up at our worst. And when we showed up, we grew in our understanding of one another. We learned to pick up on one another's cues: Who's grumpy today? Who's in a good mood? Who's a little bit more reserved than normal? Who's being unusually kind? Who's particularly tired? Who has excess energy to burn? Does someone want to pick an argument? Is someone looking for advice? For that half hour to an hour each evening, when we would sit across the table from one another, and would meet (or avoid) the gaze of the other people around that table night after night after night, the seeds of relationship were planted and our blended family slowly learned how to be together.

And here's the truly beautiful thing. I now live about 1800 miles away from most of my family. But even now, a couple decades and a couple thousand miles later, every time I sit down and eat a pot roast or a brisket I remember and cherish the connections that my family made at the table, and it is almost like they are here with me. Every time I catch a whiff of bread in the oven I almost feel like I am a kid sitting on my kitchen counter chatting with my mom as she kneads the dough.

There is something about the formation that happens around the table that seems to transcend time and space – that sticks with us even when we cannot be together.

Tonight on this Maundy Thursday we step into the story of Jesus and his disciples as they gather together for a particularly memorable meal. A meal so memorable that we bring back small pieces of their experience time and time again as we join together in worship. "This is my body. This is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me."

Tonight we remember this meal as one big step in Jesus' journey toward the cross – the last of many meals that he shared with his disciples; the moment when it is revealed that one of his friends is a betrayer and will soon be handing him over to be killed; one of his last moments of freedom before he goes out with his disciples to pray and is then arrested.

And there's a lot that happens during this supper. It's not just any meal – it is the Passover celebration – essentially dinner-meets-worship that takes place in individual's homes, as the people share together both food to sustain the body as well as ritual to remind them of the stories of their faith – to ground them in who they are as people of God – people who have been led from bondage to freedom. It's a big meal, a big celebration – one that requires planning and preparation and anticipation, in some ways

like Christmas dinner or Easter dinner might be for us, with an element of worship woven in.

Passover is serious, but it's also fun, lighthearted, celebratory. And also predictable. There is an order to it. An intentionality. Everything has a meaning, a purpose. Everything points to a key piece of their faith, to their story as God's people. So when Jesus breaks that mold, and adds something to the experience: "This bread is my body, which is given for you. This cup is my blood, poured out for you," that's not insignificant. He's making a major point that he wants to drive home. "Do this in remembrance of me." I don't think Jesus was just saying so much "every time you share Passover together, or every time you have a meal together I want you to remember me," although that might have been part of it, but rather I think he was trying to say "the way you will remember me will be in those times that you offer yourselves to be broken and poured out for the world. Do this. Step out in sacrificial love. Offer not just your food but yourselves. Embody mercy and grace and compassion. And when you do, I will be re-membered." Not remembered, as in brought to our recollection, but re-membered as in the opposite of dis-membered. Brought back together. The broken fragments of the body of Christ will be put back where they belong again. "Do this in remembrance of me." When you pour yourselves out for one another, then you – as the broken pieces of my body – will be made whole.

Friends, this year I would say that we are all probably feeling a bit more dis-membered than usual, for the simple reason that we cannot be physically together with one another right now. And that is hard. One of the things that I love most about this community is that there is a real, true, honest-to-goodness sense of *community* here, like no other place that I have ever seen. The importance of family connections, and lifelong friendships – and your deep commitment to one another (even to people who you might or might not even really like all that much). You know how to disagree openly (and sometimes loudly) with others, and yet your abiding love runs far deeper than those disagreements. It is beautiful, and incredibly healthy. It's a lovely picture of the body of Christ at its best.

The challenge, though, is that when we value community so much, and our relationships are such a deep part of who we are – a lifeline in life's challenging moments, what does the Body of Christ look like when the Body of Christ cannot gather together? When we can't see each other and talk to each other and hug each other and sing together in unison?

This is where Communion comes in.

I am going to say, first off, that there is a lot of controversy around whether or not we can faithfully celebrate Holy Communion when we are not physically gathered together. Usually, the answer would be no. But sometimes – and this is one of those rare sometimes – it makes sense. And it is absolutely the right thing to do.

Because here's the truth: when we come together for Communion, something is happening that is beyond the ordinary elements of bread and juice. God is here with us in the moment. And it's beyond just this personal experience between me and Jesus, too. Communion has a personal element, yes, but it is waaay bigger than that. When we receive communion, we are not just "communing" with God. We are also communing with one another. A lot of what happens in communion is what happens around the table with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We're not just remembering Jesus' sacrifice for us; we are seeing Christ's body re-membered as Jesus puts back together again a community that has grown distant and isolated and broken apart. In communion, we are not just gathered together with the people who are physically there with us either, but we also recognize that we are spiritually gathered together with the *rest* of the Body of Christ – the church throughout the world; the people of God who we may never see or know personally, but they are part of *us*, too, because we are all part of this same body of Christ, and we are all fellow laborers together in the ministry of the church.

All of this happens *every* time we celebrate Communion. Not just when we celebrate from our homes during a worldwide crisis.

But for us right now, in *this* moment, as we long to join together with one another; as we are painfully aware of how far apart we are, the mystery of Christ's healing presence with us is all the more important. As we receive the bread and the cup; as we remember Christ's body broken and his blood shed; as we come again to the table – to that place where our bodies and souls are both fed; that place where we are nourished and strengthened and sustained for our journeys, we come remembering that although we may feel alone, we are *not* alone. Christ is present here with us, and Christ is joining us together with one another – even across the physical distance. Even though we cannot physically look into each other's eyes, we are here. We are all here together, our spirits joined together across the physical distance by the God who was broken so that we could be put back together again.

So as we come, bringing our collective longings, our collective grief, our collective hopes and expectations, may we shaped by our time here at the table. May God unite us together in this meal, even though we cannot be together in person. May what happens here – the formation and connection that God brings about – be something that we carry with us throughout our lives – something that transcends both time and space. And may God use this moment to teach us yet again how to be the loving, generous, compassionate, self-giving Body of Christ that he modeled for us in the Last Supper.