

"BREAKING BREAD, TREASURING FRIENDS"

Luke 6:12-19; Matthew 9:10-13; Mark 6:30-32; John 11:1-3, 32-36;

Luke 22:14-15; John 15:12-15a; Luke 24:30-31a

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Like a lot of people, some of the things I missed the most during our months of pandemic precautions were things like: tea and conversation at my favorite local teashop, meeting up with a friend for lunch at a restaurant halfway between her house and mine, the big Thanksgiving dinner we usually host, a nice meal out with Jerry to celebrate a special occasion, church potlucks. Food and fellowship. The nourishment provided by good food and the replenishment of our spirits through human connection seem to go hand in hand.

Food is more than survival. It's celebration, a remembering of blessings, something shared around which we gather. It's the stuff of ritual. It's culture, tradition, memory, family. Throughout history, the willingness to sit down and break bread together has signaled a willingness to set aside differences, make peace, forge some kind of *relationship*. Food connects us – not just with those sitting across the table, but with all those whose hands produced what we eat, with the generations before us who handed down recipes or developed ways of turning raw ingredients into something edible or even delicious. Food connects us with our Creator, who feeds us from the good earth, the sun, and the rain.

Jesus must have felt this. In the gospels, we often see him around food. We read that he gave thanks to God before he broke the bread and passed it around to his disciples. He provided wine at a wedding feast, multiplied bread and fish for a huge and hungry crowd, and cooked fish over a fire for his friends. Several of his parables include mention of food and dinners.

Also woven through the gospels, and intertwined with stories involving food, is a motif of friendship. It seldom takes center stage – the gospel writers were mostly focused on showing their understanding of who Jesus was - but in almost every chapter of the gospels it's there. Jesus had friends, companions, a community, people whom he loved and who loved him.

He gathered around himself this group of people who traveled with him, and shared his life and his work. In a couple of places, we are told that they were 12 men, but we also read that there were others who were part of this group, men and women. You may remember at least a couple of times when Jesus took a few of his closest companions – Peter, James, and John – with him when he went to a quiet place to pray. He seems to have had other friends, too – siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, whom he visited at their home in Bethany. He told stories which concluded with

friends rejoicing with each other over good news. And he said to his disciples, "I have called you friends."

All this is by way of saying that before Christianity was a religion, before it was a creed, before, in fact, the followers of Jesus were even called Christians, it all began with Jesus' invitation into friendship, community, and relationships of love and service. (Bass) The sharing of food, so often mentioned by those who have written the story for us, is both a symbol and a real-life experience of the relationality of the gospel.

Jesus expressed this connection most powerfully and poignantly, I think, when he said to his friends, "I've eagerly desired to eat this Passover meal with you before I suffer." And of course there is the story of the disciples who finally recognized the risen Jesus when he broke bread with them.

Equally important for us, though, are the stories that emphasize Jesus sitting down to meals and breaking bread with folks who were considered "sinners." The gospel writers don't just happen to mention this in passing; they tell this deliberately, so that we understand that Jesus' intention is to set aside barriers and create relationship and make peace... with all of us who are sinners, who feel unworthy, who have been alienated from God or excluded from community.

I think for us to really grasp the significance of friendship and food in the gospels, it helps to have a little historical context.

One is the place of hospitality in the ancient world. To us, "hospitality" often doesn't encompass much more than throwing a fun party or greeting people at the door with a smile. But in the ancient world – and still today in many places – hospitality was much more than good manners. It was a central value of the culture, an expectation, and a sacred duty. The practice of hospitality gave travelers some assurance of finding shelter and food and water in a harsh environment, and of protection in an unfamiliar place. It also allowed those who offered hospitality to form a bond with strangers who might otherwise seem threatening. Hospitality made for a more safe and stable society.

Of course hospitality wasn't practiced all the time by everybody. (If it had been, there'd have been less need to lift it up as a virtue and encourage everyone to pursue it!) For some, the practice of hospitality was limited by concerns about becoming ritually unclean in association with unreligious persons, which is probably what's going on when the Pharisees are critical of Jesus for eating with "sinners." In Roman society, hospitality was also greatly valued, but usually in practice, it was limited to friends, family, and people of similar social status. For Jesus to both offer and accept hospitality without those sorts of limits tells us that he certainly did not see the act of sharing food with others as a trivial thing.

It is also useful to understand that friendship was greatly valued in the culture of the first century, and, like hospitality, was not considered a casual thing. Friendships were seen as critical ties of mutual obligation on which community depended. The New Testament understanding of "friend," is "one who loves." In fact, what Jesus says about love and laying down one's life for a friend was the cultural ideal of true friendship. That doesn't necessarily mean that any more people then than now were inclined to give up their lives for their friends. But it certainly communicates a depth of commitment we don't always associate with friendship.

The other quality that was seen as a mark of friendship in the ancient world was "plain and honest speaking." A true friend was someone you could count on to tell you the truth, without flattery or manipulation or an eye to their interests. Someone who'd speak openly about his real thoughts and feelings, someone willing to take the risk to share her true self with you. Not a teacher or boss, a student or subordinate, but someone with whom you could have a relationship of mutual respect and trust. (O'Day)

So when Jesus says, "I've called you friends," we should notice that this declaration of friendship comes with the *demonstration* of friendship. The very next thing he says is that he has shared with them everything that God has told him. In fact, sharing himself with his disciples, with us, with the world, has been the whole aim of his life. And then, of course, Jesus does give his life, the ultimate in loving friendship.

Jesus hospitality to us and the friendship he extends to us draw us in, not just to relationship him and with the God whose love he has made known, but into community with *everybody else* who is embraced by his love. When we experience the friendship Jesus offers us, it transforms us, and shows us that maybe we, too, can live in that kind of loving, transparent, generous way with others. We might, cynically, think this is a pipe dream, but Jesus doesn't seem to think that. "Love one another as I have loved you," he says. Who are we to argue with Jesus?

It absolutely could go without saying that what Jesus asks of us is hard. But Jesus has shown us that *relationship* is the core of the gospel. Not a list of things you have to believe. Not even ethics and good deeds. And not a personal, private relationship just between you and Jesus because you can call on him to help you with stuff.

Jesus calls us into a way of life that exercises our capacity for deep, genuine, meaningful relationship – with our fellow human beings as well as with God. The kind of relationship that takes time, that involves giving of one's self, that lingers over a cup of coffee, delights in shared laughter, holds hurts and joys in wordless prayer, can talk about hard things, and listens and encourage. Yes, relationship is hard. But without that kind of connection, we miss the possibility that's there for joy, too.

Somehow thinking about Jesus and food and friends has felt really timely to me, this spring, as we emerge from more than a year of limiting our ways of connecting with one another.

It occurs to me that as we move into this next season, there are a couple of things we might need to guard against:

One danger is that we will go back to taking all the blessings of community for granted: sharing a meal, celebrating milestones and holidays, passing the peace, hugging, singing together, communion together during worship, coffee after worship, visiting sick friends, delivering a casserole, joining hands to pray, talking at length about what's on our minds, gathering around a grieving family, throwing open the doors, making cookies to share, being able to say "everybody is welcome to come."

All that ordinary stuff (a lot of which involved food!) was really life-as-sacrament... Christ present in the sharing, the loving actions, the nourishing food and conversation, even though we sometimes didn't realize it. I would like to think that if the past year has taught us anything, we have learned a greater appreciation of these ordinary-but-sacred gifts. I hope we won't be so eager to put those months behind us that we want to leave behind their lessons.

The other danger I see is that some of us may have gotten a little too used to isolation, perhaps a little too comfortable in our personal bubbles or routines, a bit disengaged from community. Even though we have had – continue to have – lots of great ways of connecting with others from home, interaction from a distance is certainly far easier to control. There are fewer distractions. We can limit who we see, how much time we spend, not talk or share if we don't feel like it. That's all great for us introverts! I understand that a lot of folks have come to like worshipping at home in the comfort of their living room and their pajamas! And some of us, I'm sure, are still, understandably anxious about the pandemic that we aren't 100 per cent sure is behind us. Social interactions still feel a little... strange and potentially risky. It might take some time to be ready for "back to normal." That's ok.

But we can't forget that relationship is at the heart of the life Jesus calls us to.

Eventually, we need community that is real as well as virtual. We need the touch and voices and presence and diversity of other human beings. We need the fellowship and worship we share at church, the side-by-side of ministry and mission. We need time with others to really know them deeply. We need the joy of celebrating together and the gratitude that comes in the sharing of food. We need people who love us beside us when we are going through painful times. We need all different kinds of opportunities to develop relationships of love and trust.

It always feels a bit risky. Living *in general* always feels a bit risky; never more so than now. A friend shared this quote from novelist Louise Erdrich that seems so apt for our time:

“Life will break you. Nobody can protect you from that, and living alone won't either, for solitude will also break you with its yearning. You have to love. You have to feel. It is the reason you are here on earth. You are here to risk your heart. You are here to be swallowed up. And when it happens that you are broken, or betrayed, or left, or hurt, or death brushes near, let yourself sit by an apple tree and listen to the apples falling all around you in heaps, wasting their sweetness. Tell yourself you tasted as many as you could.”

In befriending us, Jesus has come to sit beside us and to share in our vulnerability and brokenness... and also in the sweetness that's all around us. Amen.

Resources:

Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*

Louise Erdrich, *The Painted Drum*

Gail O'Day, "I Have Called You Friends," 2008, Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, baylor.edu

Victoria Pope, "The Joy of Food," nationalgeographic.com