

Supper Society
Preached by
Rev. Dr. Linda Even
United Church of Fayetteville
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For Reflection: *"Meals make the society, hold the fabric together in lots of ways that were charming and interesting and intoxicating to me. The perfect meal, or the best meals, occur in a context that frequently has very little to do with the food itself."* Anthony Bourdain

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Isaiah 25.1, 4-9

O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled. On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Gospel Reading: Luke 24:28-35

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Sermon: Supper Society

Much has been made over the centuries of Jesus' table fellowship – the teaching, the events, the people he drew together around tables and how he became known to people in the breaking of the bread. We do not often however, get a glimpse of how the people gathered were connected to one another.

The idea of gathering for meals on special occasions and no occasion at all, for meals with special foods, and meals with whatever was at hand at the time (a few fish and loaves, for example) long predated Jesus in both Hebrew and world traditions. The human family has long understood that meals and who gathers for them signifies a great deal about the relationships among those gathered.

Last month, I had great opportunity to reflect on the relationships among the people with whom I shared meals. Most of the intimate family meals with just a few of us gathered were extremely casual affairs – sandwiches shared around a bed; takeout off tray tables when we were too exhausted to move.

Conversation was quiet in the moments of waiting; filled with laughter or tears at other times while we shared memories or simply the nicest, most helpful, least helpful or curious thing people had said to us during the day.

I had one other very private and most remarkable meal during that time. One of my mother's neighbors was a young mother from the Ukraine with two elementary/middle school age boys. The boys went to school; her husband worked in industry and she came to visit my mother to practice her English, which while it far outstripped my Ukrainian, was extremely limited. I had met her only once this past Christmas Eve for the briefest of moments. I walked to her apartment to bring a pile of jigsaw puzzles her sons so enjoyed. She insisted that Kelyn and I come into her living room – one wall of windows, an enormous shrine in one corner, art work by her oldest son, covering the remaining walls, a small table with four chairs and a full-size electronic keyboard its only furnishings. Even though it was mid-afternoon, she insisted on feeding me a lovely vegetable stew, home-made bread and jam, scalding hot tea, and a piece of chocolate from the Ukraine while her youngest son played Tchaikovsky on the keyboard. From time to time she patted my shoulder and told me my mother was a good person and this was hard. I will never see her again but we were bound together in important and healing ways for those moments.

There were, also of course, the meals following two funeral services. As I wrote to you, following my mother's service for which the clan gathered, there was a meal that lasted several hours. Not only were extended family members present, but friends of all of ours, members of my mother's high school graduating class, and former co-workers of my mother and father, many of whom had never met before, yet found conversation that lasted for hours. We celebrated the richness of family and connection –and with little nostalgia for a way of life quickly passing if it is not gone already – yet experienced renewed appreciation for relationships that have stood the test of time and are able to adapt in changing times.

The following Saturday played host to another funeral service and luncheon – this one with a very different gathering. At least twenty of the people present had been at my mother's service the week before. There was the small but vital extended family of our friend and the remainder of the large group was from the neighborhood where we all grew up. We attended school in different systems, so don't see one another at reunions or homecoming football games. In fact, this was the first time most of us had seen one another since we went off to college.

Our neighborhood was bound together in a remarkable way. Our friend's youngest child is severely and profoundly disabled. For eight years during his childhood, he was led through a series of exercises and therapies, one of which had to be done six times per day for ten minutes with only two days off per year – his birthday and Christmas. In an age far pre-dating on-line calendars and email, our friend managed a calendar of volunteers that brought us to their home daily and weekly for that entire eight years. When we were too young to do the physical therapy, we were charged with cajoling him into doing other exercises. While our schedules meant we were likely to work with a lot of the same people, illness, celebrations and vacations meant sooner or later we worked with everyone, and all of that meant we knew far more about one another's joys, concerns and activities than we might otherwise have. Again, there was appreciation and catching up, but little nostalgia. We left knowing that we will likely see one another again one more time when that disabled child, now a man, dies.

All of which brings us to this meal we are about to share. Sometimes it is good to focus our attention on the elements of the meal – the bread and cup; sometimes on the sacrifice of the One who prepared it for us; and sometimes on God with whom we are lifted into communion through this meal.

Yet, it is important not to lose sight of the relationships we have with the ones here gathered – which can be easy to do, given that in the moment we receive the bread and cup it can feel like a "just me and God" experience. Like the neighborhood gathering I just described, we are bound together with

one another because of our connection with one man. Just like the neighborhood I described, through our shared work and worship, prayer life, fellowship and mission, we know more about one another's joys and concerns, household news, schedules, needs, successes and stresses than we know about possibly anyone other than those with whom we share a house, blood, adoption or marriage. For good and for evil, for better and worse, in sickness and in health, with excitement or sacrificial patience, we are bound to one another in ways we will never be with anyone else. These are relationships that have and sustain strength, endurance and gift through our regular gathering, our regular sharing of this meal and others, and our regular participation in the works of discipleship to which we are called. Who is at this Table with us matters as much as the elements on it. We do have a built-in reminder of that importance as it is our tradition at the close of communion services to circle the sanctuary, join hands to sing *Bless'd be the tie that binds*. That practice is not intended as a touchy-feely or performance moment. Rather, it gives us the opportunity to physically enact our connection with an unbroken circle and to look into the faces of those with whom we have just shared a meal and to recognize the community to which we are inextricably bound.

As we come to the Table this day, let us come with appreciation for what we have, with little nostalgia for what used to be, and with gratitude to a God who empowers us to be community in a way fit for this day and time.

Invitation to the Table

Friends, let us come to the Table this day, so that we might be known to one another anew in the breaking of the bread.