

Sermon: Eating in the Kingdom of God**Scripture: Psalm 36:5-10; Luke 5:27-31****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: November 24, 2024**

If you look back over your life, what would you say are the handful of meals that stand in relief in your memory? For me, there's in general Thanksgiving meals around our living room table in Richmond, VA growing up and Wednesday night meals when the girls were young in the parsonage in Vermont with our piper friend Tim who always brought a joke with him. But there are also specific meals that shine in my memory – of course, the potluck wedding feast that Tracy and I had in the backyard of our friend's house, September 9, 1995. There's the meal I had sitting on the ground in a tent in Palestine, the makeshift home of a family run off their land, hosting us Americans with hummus, olives, and taboon bread. There's the meal that my family had, the first one, in the absence of my father, hours after his death. There are the meals at the retreat house where I go annually for my silent retreat where we eat all in silence, which is a remarkable thing to eat together but in silence. There was the longest-course and most elegant meal I'd ever eaten sitting on a patio with friends beside a river and a churning water wheel in a little village in France.

What meals stand out in your memory? For those of you going to Hospitality Hour downstairs or driving home together, ask one another about a particularly memorable meal they had. When Tracy was in her early 20's she worked for a caterer in CT and served a meal at James Taylor's house and Christopher Walken was one of the guest. That was a memorable meal for her. How about for you?

And of course over the course of a life there are many many meals eaten that are hard to get through as well. Meals where you could cut the tension with a knife, where you hardly had an appetite or could barely keep what you ate down given how heavy the room was with anger or upset or sorrow. Amazing how food doesn't taste very good when accompanied with unhappiness. Meals eaten alone when you'd rather be with the one who is missing. Meals eaten too fast with no care because you were anxious and rushed. Not many of us have experienced this but of course there are many meals for many people with not enough food on the table for what the family needs. Not all our eating and gathering for meals are easy and full of gratitude.

But hard or joyous, meals are at the center of our lives.

And of course they were front and center of Jesus' ministry too, eating together and gathering at the table. The table was in fact the primary place where Jesus revealed the nature of the Kingdom of God, where he broke down boundaries of separation, exclusivity and purity, where he was often criticized by those proper citizens who were scandalized by his eating with tax collectors and sinners, the "wrong" type of people. It was during meals where Jesus challenged the hypocrisy of those in power – "you all choose seats of privilege and power here but I say the first will be last and the last will be first." Some miracles were centered on meals – turning water into wine and multiplying loaves and fish for the multitudes more than once.

Eating and gathering at the table played into his stories and parables that he taught with – those invited or not to the wedding feast, the older brother who refused to join the celebration meal for his lost brother's return, the yeast in the bread. Eating, actually, became the singular way that Jesus asked us to remember

him – “eat this bread, drink this wine and remember me”. At his resurrection he had breakfast with his disciples at the lake side and it was at a meal that the strangers on the road to Emmaus finally realized who it was that they had encountered.

In the end, it's how our sacred scripture speaks of the final fulfillment of all things, not dissipating into nothingness or disappearing in destruction but it all ends, as Revelation tells it, in a great marriage feast, a celebratory feast which is not an ending at all but a festive new beginning. It was an eating in the first pages of the Bible that begins the fall of humanity from union with God, the earth and one another, when Eve eats of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and in the last pages of the Bible eating represents a reunion of humanity with God, the earth, and one another. That most essential act of eating, it all seems to be saying, can bring us closer to God, to one another, to health, flourishing and fulfillment or it can lead us away to separateness and alienation and illness. The 20th century French mystic and philosopher Simone Weil speaks of one of the primary ways we sin as humans is that we consume that which we should only regard, we eat what we should only behold, we devour as our own what is not ours to have.

So what does eating aligned to God and God's purposes look like compared to eating that runs counter to God? Let me lift up 4 ways of eating as, you might say, a spiritual practice that brings us closer to God instead of alienating us: to eat mindfully, to eat justly, to eat ethically, and to eat joyfully.

First of all, we are so distracted by so much and we are so committed to efficiency in our culture that eating can become one task among others as we multitask our way through the day. So eating as a spiritual practice can mean

simply eating when we eat, fully present to the act... sometimes at least, being really intentional about this. Eating mindfully can mean saying a prayer before you eat. We've labeled it "saying grace" and that's exactly what it is, the meal before us it's a manifestation of grace cause so much of it comes as gift to us not earned or deserved but as a gift. Even if you made it yourself, likely you didn't grow all the ingredients or harvest them or ship them, a lot of people were involved in your table being graced by that food. Eating mindfully is among other things about being aware of this and thankful for it.

Secondly to eat justly is about how you hold your table, is it open to others sometimes, at least, and others that might not otherwise have a place to eat or be worthy in worldly terms of eating with you. Jesus was big into this and intentionally went to the homes of those others wouldn't be caught dead in - Zaccheus the tax collector, remember he climbed a tree to see Jesus and Jesus called him down and said - "I'm coming to your house for dinner!" Zaccheus was not a guy that people liked, he was a collaborator with the enemy and made his money off the backs of his own people and Jesus had dinner with him... and he also had dinner with sex workers too, and you get the sense that it wasn't about telling them how sinful they were - he reserved that for the religious leaders - but to enjoy a meal in their company. If you just consider Jesus' disciples you realize that he ate all the time with a diverse and motley crew of people - an upper class tax collector Matthew eating with a working class fisherman Paul and a radical revolutionary Judas. I am sure there were some meals that were crazy with that group of folks! I doubt that they said "no politics for Thanksgiving!" They probably had at it all the time but with the beating heart of Jesus right there at the center it was likely held together in love...that is, until it cracked apart at the seams when

Peter denied him, Judas betrayed him, and the rest except a few women abandoned him. One too many unpleasant meals. Eating justly is being aware sometimes of who is left out at your table and being inclusive of all and equitable in how others are treated. For those of you who are having a mixed Thanksgiving with political tensions a possibility, remember that Jesus hosted such gatherings intentionally, all the time. You have the gift of practicing active respect and love in the face of tension and conflict.

Thirdly, to eat ethically is a complicated one in our non-local economy but worth considering: is what we are eating sustainably produced or doing damage to the earth, grown by companies that treat their workers well or underpay them for a profit? What kind of violence is involved in the harvesting of animal meat, in those over-sized factory farms that pay little attention to the life and the suffering of the animals involved. Eating ethically raises questions about hyper-processed foods that do damage to our bodies and are made more available to the poor who then suffer the poor health that comes along with such a diet. And the plastics. Ugh, the plastics. How do we align our eating with Kingdom of God at least a little more than we are now? It's really difficult in this culture and era to do all of this all the time but we can decide to be more conscious more of the time than we are now and remember that such things are inevitably bringing us in-line with our faith commitments or they are askew from them.

But let us also be careful of a puritanical approach - feeling guilty for this, ashamed of that, lashing ourselves with needing to do and be better because eating aligned to Jesus' way and God's purposes is also and finally eating joyfully! I don't think God wants us to grit our teeth and be so concerned with the way we are eating, whether it's sinful or not, that we sap every bit of joy out eating and

every bit of joy out of eating together. There is no doubt that Jesus was a joyful guy and enjoyed himself immensely in this beautiful reality of being enfleshed in this world. At a couple of points in the scripture it speaks of Jesus being “the Son of Man who came eating and drinking”. And the religious leaders at one point level a charge against him that he’s a glutton and a drunk! So I think we can safely assume that Jesus had his moments at least of letting loose and carousing a bit. I wonder how often the disciples split their sides laughing around the dinner table. Joy is what in the end God wants for us, right? Not perfection but joy.

And so in that spirit, I want to end with a portion of a poem that Jane brought to us at Team Meeting this week which is exactly about this, because eating and the food we are given and the meals we have and how our bodies are nourished by the earth herself and that God made us with between 5-10,000 taste buds - not just a few or a few hundred but over 5,000!! It’s all just incredible, it’s grace and it suggests that joy is at the heart of it. This poem that I’ll close on is a portion of the longer poem from Steve Garnass Holmes:

What if God is joy?
 What if the Creator is bliss and the Son is gratitude
 and the Holy Spirit is gleeful wonder?
 What if creating is God’s play,
 and the big bang was an outburst of happiness
 and the galaxies are spun from pure delight?
 What if gravity, that holds the universe together,
 is simply the pleasure of harmony,
 and every created thing’s ecstatic desire for one another?
 What if earth is God’s great celebration,
 spinning and dancing and making music and beauty
 and inviting everyone in to feast and wonder?...

What if salvation means

being rescued from our inability to rejoice?
Why not? Why not? Do you think you can convince me
that God is all somber and serious?
What if even now, as you consider this,
and think it's kind of silly,
God is laughing... and waiting?¹

¹ Steve Garnass-Holmes from his email blog and his website - Unfolding Light - <https://unfoldinglight.net/>