

## “The Christmas Dinner”

- Many of you probably know that Katy and I have been together a long time
  - Counting the years we have dated, 22 long and glorious years!
    - She’s in Children’s chapel this morning, so this is just between us...
  - We started dating back in high school, and it got serious around our senior year
  - And you’d ever know by looking today, but when we first started dating, Katy’s parents were not very fond of me.
  - To be honest, they probably had a point... I’m not sure if I would want my daughter dating my 16 year old self either
  - But there we were, dating anyway, and in some ways dating because they disapproved.
  - Parents of teenagers, there’s a lesson in there somewhere.
    - You never know who they’ll end up marrying!
  - It was not long before the first holiday season came around and for both of our families, eating together during these times was very important
  - And I’ll never forget the surprise and appreciation when Katy’s grandmother invited me to the big family Christmas dinner
  - Remember- Katy’s parents were not too keen on me at this point... but Katy’s grandmother was not going to let that stop her. :)
  - So I went, dinner was a little awkward, as you might imagine, but it was the first time I had red wine
  - And it was the first time I felt somewhat included in this different family, and began seeing them in a different light
  - Things changed ever so slightly after that dinner for the better, and tensions eased
  - And it was not long before we were off to college, and I was considered a son to them

- And while it did not change overnight, and like all things there are ups and downs in the middle
- I am convinced it was this Christmas dinner around that table together eating fettuccine and spaghetti
- And sharing red wine that changed the trajectory of my relationship with my future in-laws
- I think we all know there is something significant and special that happens when we sit and eat with each other
  - There's a potential for something so much more than simply an intake of calories for survival
  - Why it is so important for families to eat a meal together every now and then
  - And I know Jesus knew it too
  - In fact, we are in the middle of a seven week run where all Gospel readings for seven weeks in a row have something to do with food<sup>1</sup>
  - In today's reading, Jesus has just come from feeding the five thousand with only two fish, and five loaves<sup>2</sup>
  - And the people are wanting more- more miracles, more teaching, and more food
  - Jesus takes this opportunity expound on what had just happened and what it meant.
  - You see, John's Gospel was the last of the four to be written, finally put in its final form between 90-100 AD<sup>3</sup>
  - The early believers have had some time to think about what all of this means to them, the things that Jesus did
  - And some of that reflection and understanding finds its way in to this book in the long sermon-like monologues spoken by Jesus in John
  - This is one of them found only in John: Jesus says, "I am the bread of life.
  - "If you eat my flesh, if you believe in me, you'll never be hungry or thirsty again"

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<sup>1</sup> Year B, Propers 12-18

<sup>2</sup> *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B After Pentecost 1*, Marion Soards, ed., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 151

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel\\_of\\_John#Authorship](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_John#Authorship)

- It's a very shocking thing to say- the disciples were probably just as surprised
- They could not eat flesh or drink blood without becoming unclean
- So I am left believing that Jesus was trying desperately to get their attention here
- Maybe trying to move their focus away from the recent feeding miracle onto more spiritual matters
- A shock and awe attempt, perhaps, but mixed in with some references to Hebrew scripture and allusions to the Eucharist which was to come later
- I imagine Jesus saying, stop worrying about the bread and fish from a few hours ago <sup>4</sup>
- That was like the mana in the wilderness, it is a miracle, but it only lasts for now
- But there is something that lasts much longer, something I am here to give you
- My flesh and blood are that food that you really need, believe in me.
- Jesus is now aligning himself with the mana the ancient Israelites ate, except this time it will give them eternal life
- Even that phrase, "eternal life," is loaded with meaning
- There is more to this phrase eternal life than we get from our concise translation <sup>5</sup>
  - The implication of these words is more than the life after death kind of eternal life
- It is also just as much about the eternally deep present moment
- Yes, in it we are promised eternal life after death
- But also the joy and contentment that comes in the present moment after eating a great meal
- These earliest believers had learned something that we still need to hear, something they made sure was in John's Gospel
- That God is just as essential to our wellbeing as bread.
- And we find this nourishment when we come together and share a meal
- When we think about our Eucharist, the bread and wine we share each week

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<sup>4</sup> Ginger Barfield, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect\\_date=8/19/2012](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=8/19/2012)

<sup>5</sup> D. Mark Davis, [http://www.leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/08/from-bread-of-heaven-to-gnawing-on-flesh\\_14.html](http://www.leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/08/from-bread-of-heaven-to-gnawing-on-flesh_14.html)

- I know traditionally this meal is associated with the Last Supper with Jesus the disciples, and it's true
- But I tend think of it more like this: the Sacrament of the Eucharist as Jesus feeding the five thousand, with plenty left over
- Everyone who gathered was allowed to eat, everyone invited to come for dinner
- Everyone invited to be a part of the family
- And the meager gifts of a young child combined with God's infinite grace was enough for all.
- And feeding much more, even, than just their physical bodies- feeding their souls.
- Just as eating is essential to our bodies wellbeing, regular partaking of God's grace is just as essential to our spiritual wellbeing]
- Wouldn't it be so much easier if we were equally aware of our spiritual hunger as we are of our physical hunger
- If we knew on a gut level when we needed God's grace- maybe if we heard our souls growl like we hear our stomachs
- Or maybe if we considered prayer and sacrament to be as important as our first cup of coffee
- Maybe that would help remind us of just how important it really is.
- Martin Luther sums it up like this<sup>6</sup>:
  - "I wish I could get you to pray the way that my dog goes after meat."
- With the hunger and thirst of our souls so closely connected to the hunger and thirst of our bodies
  - There is no surprise that eating together has continued to be one of the primary way of being community together
  - Week after week we gather to feed both parts of us
  - It is also no surprise that Jesus also tells us to feed and clothe those in physical need around us as well
  - Knowing that by doing so, souls will be fed as well
  - And when we gather around the table, it changes us- we do not leave the way we arrived
  - This meal has the ability to change the trajectories of our lives and our relationships, to shape us to be more like Christ
  - Paul writes to the Ephesians that we are to be, in fact, imitators of God
  - People who speak the truth in love

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<sup>6</sup> William H. Willmon, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B Volume 3, 333

- Who can and should get angry at times, when we see prejudice and injustice
- But instead of allowing it to turn to bitterness and sin, we turn it into positive action
- Who speak and act in ways that instead of tearing others down to lift ourselves up,
- We intentionally try and build up others around us
- It shapes us into a community who forgives, as we have been forgiven
- Who works hard, not so we can accumulate more and more things that are a poor substitute for real joy and spiritual peace...
- But so that we can help the needy
- That is the kind of people Paul wants the Church at Ephesus to become
- The kind of people we decide to work toward when we are born into this new life in Christ
- It requires dedication, commitment, and the sustenance to keep us going
- It is a way of life so often contrary to what we see all around us, the values so often touted by our culture at large
- Thank goodness we have a God who understands that our souls need nourishment just as much as our bodies
- And offers us plenty
- D. T. Niles says, “Evangelism is one hungry person telling another hungry person where to find bread,”<sup>7</sup>
  - Indeed, I hope we become hungry for this bread, this bread of life
  - This nourishment found in our sacraments and our daily walk with God
  - And know deep down know we cannot live fully without it
  - This spiritual sustenance that is as important as food and water when trying to live the life to which we are called
  - And that we would be willing to share it by inviting others to the table
  - Including them in the family, to a new way of life
  - God is inviting us to Christmas dinner- and here there is plenty of food for our souls.

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://lindynuggets.blogspot.com/2012/08/pentecost-11b.html>