

Jesus the Host

Terri Lynn Friesen, October 23, 2016

We are often influenced by our culture in subversive ways that we don't realize, and I was reflecting this week that the bigger picture of the sermons series of late has been an example of that. In agriculture and food culture - the theme of field to table has re-gained popularity in recent years: the quite sensible realization that it's good to be connected to the food that we eat and understand its origins. The field to table theme - I've noticed - can also describe our sermon series over this past spring, summer and fall. We've talked about how God is present to us in soil, weeds, fertilizer, and harvest, and then began to explore how Jesus is present with us at the table through discussing our experience of communion traditions. Today marks the end of our series, though hopefully not the end of our conversations, and we conclude at the table.

There are several ways we can approach communion from a biblical context. Today I'd like to lead us through a few of these, through the lens of some of the meals where Jesus was host.

I think it's important, as Patty has said previously in one of her first discussions on communion, to not forget our history, and what the practice of taking communion has meant to the Mennonites who have come before us. It is also important to think beyond our particular tradition, and look to the traditions of which Jesus was a part, and to the traditions that Jesus helped begin. So, what can we learn from the meals that Jesus hosted?

In her guide published by Mennonite Church Canada, Elsie Rempel invites us to set our framework for thinking about communion by focusing on the meals Jesus *hosted* in the Bible. And so the thoughts I share today rely quite a bit on Session 2 of this guide. Together we'll

consider The Passover, we'll look at meals where people recognize Jesus as the Christ, think about the idea of meals as a heavenly foretaste.

Passover

We begin with the **Passover**, since this is what Jesus is celebrating when he inaugurates communion. We find the story of the first pass-over in Exodus 12:1-28. The celebration of the Passover festival becomes a way that Israel remembers God's salvation, grace and mercy in God's action to free Israel from slavery in Egypt.

If you've had the chance to participate in or observe a passover or **Seder meal** - the point of the menu is not to be nutritionally balanced, but to be rich in symbolism and meaning, with different elements - parsley, salt water, unleavened bread and other things - reminding participants of the story of Israel's deliverance, telling the story as the meal progresses. Another interesting thing about this household-based tradition, is that children have specific roles - including asking aloud, "Why is this night different from all other nights?". I think this is really important - we need to speak aloud WHY we participate in the symbolic practices that ground our faith. We need to talk to our children, and new-comers amongst us, and use our words - as well as our symbolic actions, and our lives - and explain why we think God's saving action is worth remembering.

Meals of Recognition

Now, what do I mean by meals of recognition?

Some of the most captivating stories of Jesus - to me - are when Jesus shows up and serves a meal without those around him really knowing what's going on right away. But these shared meals provide a context to Jesus' friends recognizing him for who he is - the Messiah,

the Christ. One of these stories - found in the gospel of John that was read for us earlier - is breakfast on the beach. When I lived in Vancouver studying theology, this was a story to which many a grad student pointed to as an excuse to partake in leisurely brunches often. If they were on the beach, even better. Elsie Rempel points out some interesting, poignant details of this beach breakfast that helped me think anew about this scene:

She says:

In John 21, a huge catch of fish prompts the disciples to recognize the risen Jesus. Jesus' beloved disciple recognizes him and tells Peter, "It is the Lord!" Peter responds immediately, leaving the others to haul the full nets to shore. The charcoal fire and breakfast invitation awaiting him on that shore are reminiscent of the scene where he had denied Jesus earlier, and they trigger healing of that painful memory. After-breakfast conversation offers Peter the opportunity to reaffirm his love for Jesus, and provides a model for Christians in all eras to do the same.

The large haul of fish reminds us of Jesus' earlier miracle of feeding the 5000 (John 6:1-11), and of God's abundant grace and mercy. It also symbolizes the church's mission as "fishers of people." "Jesus draws all (in John chapter 12 verse 32), and many come." This last recorded meal of the risen Jesus with his disciples has much potential for our communion services.

Rempel goes on to highlight the encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, and the meal that followed:

*In the Emmaus Story, the questioning stranger caused the disciples' "hearts to burn within them." He offered questions and invited them to share the story of Jesus' passion, and then expounded on the teachings of the prophets. However, it was in the act of giving thanks for the bread, and breaking and offering it to them, that they recognized **Jesus** as the stranger. The exchanging roles of teacher/learner, [and] guest/host in this story are delightful and instructive for our relationships with each other, with guests, and with Christ.*

Rempel invites us to wonder: will inviting all to the communion table - in the ritual of breaking bread and drinking juice - open the eyes of those who do not yet recognize Jesus as Lord? Could it open the ears of those who have disowned Jesus when they hear him ask - as he asked Peter - *'Would you come eat with me?'* (pause)

And would considering ourselves guests at this table - which we probably think we are - but when we pause for a moment and think about all of the HOSTING that we do - we collectively and individually host a lot. And this is beautiful and good. I'm not suggesting we change that. But perhaps I am not alone in recognizing my own discomfort on occasion, when it's my turn to be the guest. Sometimes, when I'm the guest, I don't know what to do with myself, because I don't have the excuse of making someone else tea - but Jesus invites us to be his guests, which brings me to the last idea of the communion meal as a heavenly foretaste.

Heavenly Foretastes

The picture of the banquet is for me, currently - is the most helpful picture of what it is to take communion with Jesus, our Host.

Growing up, I too - like it sounds many here also - learned a very high view of communion. Though I never participated in a separate, evening service, communion was about reflecting on Jesus' last meal, where he called us to remember his death, which meant, to me,

to remember my sin. The emotional experience was right up there with Good Friday - and if I couldn't find a good amount of remorse and distress for my sin (in those moments), I felt like I was doing communion wrong. Like maybe I didn't fully appreciate what it meant to be saved by the blood of Jesus. And though I am glad I learned - at a relatively young age - about repentance and forgiveness, and what it means to live in grace - the imagery of the joy and fullness of being with Jesus at the banqueting table has been far more full and live-giving to my faith.

Part of this came with gaining a greater appreciation for food, and for the goodness of eating together. I came around to this appreciation kind of the long way. I grew up in a house where my mom fostered a good atmosphere where we had nourishing meals, and we always ate supper together, and often ate as an extended family on holidays. But I was kind of an over-serious student in my first years of university, and often ate alone in the cafeteria, the library, or my room to save time and keep studying. I often thought of food in terms of nutrition and didn't really have a healthy appreciation for fellowship.

However, my understanding for table fellowship followed the same sequence as this sermon series - from field to table. I was interested in growing food long before I was attracted to cooking and hosting and eating with others. But as I began working on various farms and intentional communities as a volunteer or intern, it was expected that I learn to cook with what we grew, that I host large tables full of hungry young farm apprentices and guests, and that I participate not just through working in the garden or learning in a classroom, but through fellowship around a table. And slowly, my enjoyment of these things grew, until it became something that I sought to try and cultivate, and invite people into. And the house that Thomas lived in when we first met had an 'open table policy' where four nights a week, two of the nine housemates paired up to cook, and it was understood that housemates could invite friends,

neighbours, and even people that they knew less well. Their giant table often overflowed with people, and laughter, and good conversation, and somehow there always seemed to be enough to go around.

My hope is that most of us could rifle through our memories to find a moment of joy and contentment at a table. Maybe you have a memory of when you were partway through a meal - where the food is just SO good, but as good as it is, you are at the same time just soaking in the atmosphere. Whether it is a big, long table with many people around it, or just a few of you enjoying a good, intimate conversation. For me it doesn't need to be a fancy meal with perfectly paired flavours or even where all the dishes match. Whatever this scene looks like for you, the idea is that you are fully at home, fully content, and your company feels fully desired - someone is delighted that you are there. And when I think of Jesus inviting us to the banqueting table - this is the picture that I see.

This, for me, has been a re-occurring, and perhaps more helpful, image of communion than the one I started with in my childhood. Rather than conjuring feelings of guilt, the tears that spring to my eyes are ones of overwhelming gratitude and gift: "Me? ... You want me to come to your banquet?... Are you sure? ... You don't want to save space for him or her or them?" But I am always assured that those questions are silly. The loaf is big enough.... The cup is deep enough. ...The table is long enough. He and she and they are welcome - they are welcomed with the same enthusiastic invitation that I am. But the number of people invited does not dilute the genuine delight with which the Lord receives me when I sit down with him.

And it is out of the peace and joy that comes with being welcomed and delighted in - that my devotion to God, and conviction for my mistakes, and dedication to the work of the church - and all the other *doing* is birthed - the order is different.

Isaiah paints this picture:

On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare

a feast of rich food for all peoples,

a banquet of aged wine—

the best of meats and the finest of wines.

7 On this mountain he will destroy

the shroud that enfolds all peoples,

the sheet that covers all nations;

8 he will swallow up death forever.

The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears

from all faces;

he will remove his people's disgrace

from all the earth.

The Lord has spoken.

9 In that day they will say,

"Surely this is our God;

we trusted in him, and he saved us.

This is the Lord, we trusted in him;

let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

May we, as Isaiah expressed - know the goodness of being welcomed by Jesus the host - whether it be the formality of the communion plate, a surprise encounter like breakfast on the beach, or around a table where there is room enough and feast enough for all. And may God be present with us as we humbly explore what it means to celebrate this, and invite others to the banquet.