

Let's Do Lunch
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Pound Ridge Community Church
Third Sunday of Easter
April 15, 2018
Luke 24:36b-48

Recently I was reading an interesting newsletter from the Cornell University College of Human Ecology about the effects of having regular family meals, something that for many families has become a memory from a simpler and less-scheduled past. You've probably read articles on the benefits of eating meals together as a family. This newsletter cited a study that said that children in families who eat together regularly are 35% less likely to engage in disordered eating, 24% more likely to eat healthier foods, and 12% less likely to be overweight.ⁱ

The benefits claimed also go beyond personal health. "A three-year study by two Emory University psychology professors suggests families who regularly eat meals together have children who know more about their family history and tend to have higher self-esteem, interact better with their peers and show higher resilience in the face of adversity."ⁱⁱ

It's an intuitively obvious fact that good things can happen when we engage each other as family members and friends. But particularly wonderful things seem to be possible when the engagement occurs in the sharing of a meal – things that transcend the satisfaction of our physical need for food. The friendly "Let's do lunch" that we've all both said and heard is more than a recognition that we need to have our stomachs filled. It signals a desire to be in a deeper kind of fellowship. The invitation to lunch isn't really about eating at all. It's about companionship; about hoping that we can be connected in a new and special way with each other.

This all relates to today's gospel reading from Luke. That's because a meal figures subtly but importantly in it. We find the disciples apparently still hiding out in a state of uncertainty and fear over what has happened. Luke tells us that while the disciples were deep in conversation, "Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'" (Luke 24:36) The disciples were all startled, and initially believed that they were seeing a ghost. Jesus shows them the wounds on his body to convince them that it is really him, but they still have a difficult time believing what is going on.

Luke says that Jesus opened their minds so that they could understand the scriptures. Jesus explains to them how all the teachings of the Hebrew Bible, and everything he has said to them, connect with the confusing events that they have been witnessing. But before he does that, he rather abruptly asks them if they

have anything to eat. The request seems a little out of place, really. Probably the very last thing the disciples are thinking about right now is food. Their master, whom they watched die, is suddenly standing in their midst, in the flesh.

But food is a common theme in the post-resurrection gospels. When Jesus finds the disciples in today's lesson, they had been in midst of a conversation with the two people who had earlier been with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. And if you know that story, you remember that they had not recognized Jesus while they were walking together on the road. The full recognition that they were with the risen Christ only came when they were at a meal together, as they were breaking bread.

One of the explanations that you hear for why the risen Jesus might have asked for something to eat today is to prove to them that he was really there in body. In today's gospel lesson, when he sees how fearful the disciples are, he says, "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." (Luke 24:39) And a ghost also has no need of food.

But I wonder if proving to them that he is no ghost is the only reason why Jesus would want to eat. I don't think it's surprising that Jesus would choose to comfort and enlighten his disciples in the context of a meal, when we consider the central importance of meals in Jesus' life and ministry. Wherever there's a meal, Jesus always seems to be showing up. Think with me about all the stories you know that involve meals.

We remember how Jesus sat in a remote place with his disciples and followers, and when meal time came the disciples suggested that Jesus send the crowd away so they could find something to eat. But Jesus had a different idea. He blessed a few meager fish and loaves of bread, and prepared a feast that fed thousands. Everyone ate their fill, nobody left unsatisfied, and when they were done there were more leftovers than what they started with. This meal served as a foretaste of the banquet that will occur when the kingdom comes in all its fullness. Jesus frequently talked about what the kingdom of God would be like by using a meal as a metaphor. There, for people of every kind, from every time and place, Jesus will serve up a heavenly feast that will never end. Everyone will have their fill, and nobody will be left out, nobody will leave unsatisfied.

Jesus spent the last evening with his disciples at a meal. He shared the bread and cup with them, and told them, "This is my body. This is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me." And he left them with the eternal promise that he would be there with them whenever they gathered together around the table.

And Jesus wasn't picky about whom he ate with. One of the most damning things the Pharisees could think of to say about Jesus was this: "[He] welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:2) The problem wasn't just that Jesus welcomed

sinners. That would be bad enough. But eating with them went far beyond welcoming them as friends. It was communicating his unconditional acceptance of them, and his desire to be connected to them in a special way.

And do you know what happened at those meals? Resurrection happened. Jesus raised people to new life. I think that in joining the disciples once again for a meal in today's gospel lesson, the post-Easter Jesus is reminding us all that he is, and will be forever, present and bringing new life to every table at which the hungry are filled, the despised are loved, the outcasts are welcomed. When Jesus said, "Let's do lunch," it was never just about eating.

And one thing that is abundantly clear as we think about all those meals is that Jesus intended that there be a place at the table for everyone. He told us that in many ways. He sometimes used parables, like the story of the king who sent his servants far and wide to invite everyone they could find to the wedding banquet. But it was not only at the "hereafter banquet" where Jesus wanted everyone to have a seat.

Even though I've been saying that Christ's pre- and post resurrection meals weren't primarily about satisfying physical needs, they were still about satisfying physical needs. Everyone needs to eat. And these stories also remind us of our responsibility to see that everyone does. The eternal feast is important, but what happens here and now has eternal significance as well. Jesus even told us with crystal-clarity in Matthew that he considered our feeding those who do not have enough to eat to be so important, so very important, that when we do it, it is a kindness done to Jesus personally.

There's a very old page of jokes that has been making its way around the Internet for years. Maybe you've seen it. It asks the question, "How many church members does it take to change a light bulb?" It's a variation of the old jokes like, "How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? Just one, but the bulb has to really want to change."

These jokes are about denominations and faith traditions. I'm not going to share the jokes about other denominations with you, but I will tell you the one about United Methodists. It clearly pokes some fun at us, but I think it also shows remarkable insight. How many United Methodists does it take to change a light bulb? The answer is: we don't know, but whether your light is bright, dull, or completely out, you are loved. You can be a light bulb, turnip bulb, or tulip bulb. Church-wide lighting service is planned for Sunday. Bring bulb of your choice and a covered dish to share.

I have a couple of reactions to this joke as a United Methodist. The first is that it speaks well of us. If it is true that the world thinks best characterizes the United Methodist Church is that we don't care what kind of bulb you are, then I would have to say that we're doing something right.

But the thing that really gets at who we are, and probably resonated particularly with those of you who have been Methodists a long time, is the covered dish part. I've gone to covered dish suppers at the church my whole life. After my mother passed away several years ago, as we were clearing out the things in her kitchen, we found that most of her serving dishes still have the remnants of the little pieces of masking tape on the bottom with her name on them, placed there to make sure she got her dishes back when the suppers were over. I remember how, following the funeral of my grandfather, nearly every one of the members of the Sharon Springs Methodist Church showed up at my grandmother's house with a casserole. Many of you did the same for our family when we arrived here.

Somehow, the profound significance of sharing a meal seems to have become permanently imbedded in United Methodist DNA. And if that's true, that's a very good thing. At the end of today's gospel lesson, Jesus tells his disciples, "You are witnesses of these things." (Luke 24:48) And that is what we are. We bear witness to our resurrected Lord when we gather to share what God has given us out of his boundless generosity, and give thanks to God for it, and enjoy not only the food, but each other.

But we give our most powerful witness to the resurrection when we are working to make the table bigger. We witness to the resurrection on the last Sunday of every month as our children bring forward bags of food for the Community Center. We witness to the resurrection standing in the February cold in front of the market collecting for the Souper Bowl of Caring. We do it when we solicit support from our friends for the annual Crop Walk "to end hunger" at Ward Pound Ridge reservation. We do when we bake a lasagna or stuff breakfast bags for the Emergency Men's Shelter. And we give our truest witness that Christ is still present when we are greeting the homeless men, and chatting with them as we fill their plates.

The good news of today's gospel is that the risen Christ invites us to do lunch. But he insists that we set the table, and welcome everyone to come and eat, too.

You're invited. Bring a covered dish to share.

ⁱ "Do Family Meals Really Make a Difference?" by Eliza Cook and Rachel Dunifon from the newsletter "Parenting in Contxt" at <http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/upload/Family-Mealimes-2.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.physorg.com/news7166.html>