

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Rally Day/20th Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 19, 2018

Kitchens & Classrooms

Proverbs 9:1-6; John 6:35, 51-58

Our reading from the Gospel of John, chapter 6,
might be one of the more baffling we encounter in the gospels.

One thing in these verses comes through quite clearly:

**the eternal life Jesus offers us
has something to do with eating and drinking.**

We get that.

It's just that it's not a very appetizing message,
not very palatable to modern ears, especially Protestant ones.

Nevertheless, the church has taken this message to heart—or rather to stomach—
over the centuries...

...as evidenced by some of the earliest art of the Christian community,
paintings found in the catacombs of Rome,
such as the one on our bulletin today of a fish and a loaf of bread;
and as evidenced by the fact that we place a table
as a centerpiece of our worship space.

Our table is engraved with Jesus' words from John 6:35,
I am the Bread of Life.

Other communion tables are engraved with Jesus command,
Do this in remembrance of me,
and the "this" we are commanded to "do"
is to eat and drink.

In last week's sermon I contrasted the old adage, "You are what you eat."
with a different notion that, "You are whom you meet."

But when it comes to table fellowship,
these two truisms come together as one:
usually when we meet, we eat!

Eating is a matter of community in the church;
eating is a matter of community-building in the church
and, apparently, if we take Jesus seriously here
a matter of vital importance for what he calls *eternal life*.

We might offer further evidence of the centrality of eating and drinking for the life of the church
by noting the aroma of pancakes, bacon, and sausage in the church today.

On this Rally Day,

as we gather with fresh energy to kick off a new church year,
we have been tripping breakers right and left with electric griddles plugged in
throughout the fellowship spaces of the church.

It's probably worth noting that our church campus includes
no fewer than 5 kitchens and kitchenettes—

I suppose that says something about our priorities.

This has been the case, as well, for the other churches I've served over the years.

My church in Pittsburgh boasted an impressive industrial kitchen adjacent to the fellowship hall, down beneath the sanctuary, complete with a dumbwaiter to lift plated meals up to the kitchenette just above it, adjacent to the church parlor—a feature, by the way, that was not lost on the teenagers who found it an entertaining means of transportation at youth lock-ins over the years.

And in my first years of ministry in the little rural village of Churchville, Virginia, the congregation had completed a renovation just before I arrived: What had begun as the simple replacement of the hood over the range in the old kitchen had quickly evolved into a major renovation to add a brand new, full-sized kitchen to the back of the fellowship hall.

Churches take eating seriously,
and is it any wonder, given Jesus's words today
about eating true food and drinking true drink
in order to truly live.

We can learn a lot about people and their culture
by observing what they eat and how they eat it.

Think about what we eat...

Do we, like so many of our global neighbors,
eat primarily staples like rice and beans,
with just a few fruits and vegetables thrown in?

Or do we feast on the fatty meats of animals
that were raised for years on grain that might otherwise have fed
hundreds of people?

Do we eat food grown within a few miles of where we live and work,
or do we eat out-of-season fruits,
flown in from warmer climates thousands of miles away,
or fish transported frozen
from oceans on the other side of the planet?

Do we race through the fast food line, and scarf our food while driving,
or spend time selecting fresh foods at a local farmer's market?

With whom do we eat? Or do we eat alone? And why?

Do we eat around a carefully set table,
in an atmosphere that focuses on the meal as an event,
or do we eat standing? Or sitting at a desk? Or behind a steering wheel?

Do we pause before eating for a ritual of gratitude,
acknowledging the sources of our nourishment,
the food as a gift,
the act of eating as sacred,
or the act of eating together as formative?

If eating well is a central metaphor for abiding in Christ,
then we might do well to pay greater attention to how we eat.¹

But there is also some irony in this metaphor
since there are significant ways that abiding in Christ
is very unlike eating.

When we eat,
we absorb our food and it becomes part of us;
we retain our physical form and distinctness
by chewing up and destroying what we eat.

"Eating, in other words, absorbs the other into me...
The absorption of another's form into my being [is] one of the great paradoxes of eating:
to preserve the form of my life, the form of another's life must end...
we do not really abide with our food
because in the eating of it we also destroy it."²

But something quite different than this is going on
when accept Jesus' invitation to *eat my flesh and drink my blood*,
something other than consuming him:

Though we accept Christ into our lives by faith,
the living reality of his person remains intact.
At the same time,
he takes us into himself without dissolving our distinct personality.

So we have what has been called an "I-Thou relationship."
Neither the "I" nor the "Thou" is absorbed into the other,
but the two abide together in life-giving relationship.

The presence of God is not scarce, diminishing, depletable,
or least of all consumable;
rather, God's grace is abundant, abiding, eternal, and inexhaustible.

Jesus is not consumed or used up as a religious commodity belonging to believers.
Jesus abides in us and sustains us as the food that is never depleted.³

The Reformed Tradition has always tended to focus
less on what is happening with the actual food of its sacred meals
and more on what is happening among the people around the table —
between the people and Christ,
and between the people and one another.

When we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper,
we don't really make any grand claims
about precisely how the bread and the Welch's grape juice
become the body of Christ in any physical or metaphysical sense;
in fact, we really don't think anything physical or metaphysical happens
at all.

What we believe is that we are lifted spiritually into God's presence by this meal.
The meal elevates us into God's presence
and so gives us a greater perspective on the world.
As we sit together around our church family's table,
we share in a real fellowship with Christ
who we believe is really present with us.
This the doctrine of Real Presence:
Christ is really present with us,
and this presence is what true life is all about.

But the most profound thing we claim
isn't really about what happens at the communion table itself,
but what that table reveals to us about all our other tables:
namely, that Jesus shows up there, too—
Jesus is just as really present at all our other tables, too.

The feasts we share at the Rally Day pancake breakfast,
or at the Agape Dinner on the first Sunday of December,
or on Wednesday Night Fellowship
or at Table Talk on the first Tuesdays at Community Tap—
**we really ought to be showing up to these places
with the same reverence and expectation
as we show up to this communion table.**

Part of our reverence in approaching these tables is recognizing that we come as guests,
invited to a table where our Lord is the host.
That means showing hospitality, and a welcoming spirit,
to the others who are also invited to the feast.

And it's important to say on this Rally Day
that we extend this same hospitality to one another in the name of Christ
when we gather with one another in our classrooms at Fourth,
where we partake of the bread of life in other forms.

As we read from Proverbs today,
Wisdom has built her house, mixed her wine, and set her table,
and she invites us to share in the feast that she has prepared:
*Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.
Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.*

That's what these church classrooms are all about,
for young and old, and every age in between:
We are tucking in to Wisdom's feast in our classrooms.
But we are also offering hospitality to each other
as we partake of this living food together.

We make room for one another at the table,
and we all come with varying appetites, and preferences, likes and dislikes,
and part of hospitality is helping everyone to get something nourishing to eat.

Of course, we need to be adults about this. At least, the adults need to be adults.
Finding nourishment for the soul might sometimes involve
trying something new,
or eating something you don't necessarily like the taste of
because you know it will be good for you.

Sometimes, in addition to the bread of life,
we might need to eat the green leafy vegetables of life,
and even develop an appetite for them.

It has been said that the Christian faith is all about relationships;
indeed, that Christianity *is* a relationship
with God in Jesus Christ,
and with one another, in Jesus Christ.

It has been said also that the Christian faith is more caught than taught.

Maybe this is why we place such an emphasis on sitting at tables together,
and sharing in meals together.

Gathering together as the family of God,
is the way we learn to experience eternal life —
life with Christ truly present.

Together we partake of the presence of Christ.

Together we 'eat his flesh' and 'drink his blood' — so to speak —
by sitting down and tucking in to a meal (literal and figurative)
with our flesh and blood brothers and sisters.

At the end of Jesus' bread of life discourse, John tells us,
many of this disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.
I guess they found it unpalatable, too.

*So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"
Simon Peter answered him,
"Lord, to whom can we go?
You have the words of eternal life."*

In the end, that is what keeps us coming to our kitchen and classrooms.
We believe that here, together,
in the body of Christ,
we receive the words of eternal life.

So on this Rally Day,
we recommit ourselves to gathering together in this way...
...that we may partake of the true bread, and the true drink,
...and live the life that is truly life.

Thanks be to God for preparing this feast.

¹ Michael J. Hoyt, *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Volume 1, Chapters 1-9* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015) 202

² Norman Wirzba, *Food & Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 156.

³ Hoyt, *Feasting on the Gospels*, 204