

Healing Divisions over Dinner

Sunday, January 26, 2020

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

One day a man said to God, "I would like to know what Heaven and Hell are like." God showed the man two doors. Inside the first one, in the middle of the room, was a large, round table with a pot of vegetable stew in the middle. It smelled delicious, but the people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. Each person held a spoon with a very long handle. They would reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths. God said, "You have seen Hell."

Behind the second door there was the same large, round table and the large pot of wonderful vegetable stew. The people held the same long-handled spoons, but they looked well nourished, laughing and talking. The man said, "I don't understand." God smiled. "It is simple," God said, "Love only requires one skill. These people learned early on to share and feed one another. While the greedy think only of themselves."

The "Parable of the Long Spoons" is not a bible story, but a version of it may be found in many cultures. For example: in China, the pot holds rice and the people feed one another with long chopsticks. The point of the parable is this: in heaven, the diners cooperate, feeding one another across the table and everyone is filled. This story reminds us that many of the world's problems can be solved over a meal at a table.

Growing up, the kitchen was the heart of our home. In our kitchen there was a large island with stools, around which my family would eat, do homework, talk things out, and play games together. That island-table was the center of our family's life. It's at tables, over meals that grievances are shared and reconciliation begins; great announcements and events are celebrated; and we put the world aside for a few minutes to focus on family matters.

It's no wonder, then, that Jesus placed a table at the center of our worship and work. Jesus makes his most profound points about including the outcast by inviting sinners and tax collectors to eat with him. Around Christ's table, everyone is welcome, and no one is a stranger. The table, along with the cross and the water of baptism, is one of the best symbols of our faith and our life together.

Unfortunately, we often forget the unity we find at Christ's table. Clearly, there are divisions in Christ's church. We draw hard lines which deepen those divisions. Conservative or Liberal. Traditional or Contemporary. Black, White or Brown. Indigenous or Immigrant. Gay or Straight. Pro-choice or Pro-life. Pre-millennial and Post-millennial. Organ-led hymns or praise band songs. Infant baptism or believer's baptism. Today, the splintering of the church continues unabated. Some people joke that Christians have a strange approach to math: They multiply by division!

The Church in Corinth had divisions, too, and the apostle Paul is not amused. In his first letter to that church, Paul challenges the Corinthian Christians to live a cross-shaped life, one which includes efforts to maintain the unity of the church. *"Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose"* (v. 10).

"Be in agreement," says Paul, with no divisions. Be united in the same mind and the same purpose. Easier said than done, don't you think? Paul is not naïve about the challenge of maintaining unity. For starters, he knows that there is gossip in the church, which is always a destructive force: *"For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters,"* writes Paul. *"What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ'"* (vv. 11-12).

Although the names have changed, Christians still proclaim their loyalties to certain church leaders. Some say, "I follow Rick Warren" or "I follow Pope Francis" or "I follow William Barber," and by doing so announce that they are Evangelical or Catholic or Progressive in their practice of the Christian faith. Which is not such a terrible thing. The church needs inspirational leaders, and it is natural that charismatic leaders will have followers. But at the end of the day we should all proclaim, "I belong to Christ." Our challenge is to live a cross-shaped life, not an Evangelical- or Catholic- or Progressive-shaped life.

Paul ridicules anyone who places a human church leader ahead of Jesus Christ. *"Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"* (v. 13). Of course not! Christ died for each of us, we are all baptized into Christ's church, and Christ cannot be divided. Therefore, concludes Paul, the church should not be divided.

So how do we work to achieve unity within the Christian community? No one can wave a magic wand and make these divisions disappear, but we can share a meal! In a book called

We Will Feast: Rethinking Dinner, Worship, and the Community of God, Kendall Vanderslice suggests that divisions in Christian churches can be healed around a dinner table. To write the book, she spent a year travelling around the country visiting “dinner churches”: churches that have a shared meal at the center of their communal life.

Vanderslice worked as a baker and labored in the restaurant industry. She also studied food at Boston University and theology at Duke University. As a result, she brought depth and expertise to her church visits. At Potluck Church in Kentucky, she found that everybody brings something to the table. Community Dinners is a Seattle-based group that gathers for meals and reaches out to feed the hungry. When Church-in-a-Pub offers worship in Lansing, Michigan, restaurant servers walk around taking orders while the pastor offers Communion.

Vanderslice discovered that in “dinner churches”, relationships deepen as people eat, pray, and talk together because they satisfy two basic human needs: nourishing the body and finding companionship for the soul. Vanderslice concludes that churches who eat together experience new forms of unity; their worship and work is deeper and more meaning-filled.

The unifying power of a meal really shouldn't surprise us. Jesus established his church around a table and asked his followers to eat together in remembrance of him. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul warns about divisions at the Lord's Supper, and says to members of the church, *“Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread”* (10:17). According to Paul, the one body partakes of the one bread. The Church should always be united by the act of eating together.

Vanderslice found this to be true in many dinner churches. She found that “each had slightly different ideas about how to read Scripture, what they believed Communion to be or how they understood God's engagement with the world.” These churches were as diverse as the range of congregations across our country. But she found that “the same Holy Spirit is present and active in every single dinner-church community,” helping her to see that “God is at work bringing us back to the table.”

At the table, Christians bond despite of their differences. At the table, says Vanderslice, “we grasp and share the most basic need of all humanity: the need to eat and drink. We bond when we sit down at the table, claiming first and foremost that we eat and drink together in remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection.” At the table, we live a cross-shaped life.

The apostle Paul is focused on the power of the cross. *“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel,”* he writes, *“and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”* (vv. 17-18).

When we sit down to eat and drink together, we remember Christ's death and resurrection: the message of the cross, “the power of God.” We eat one bread as one united body. We believe that the risen Christ is present with us, drawing us together as the community that is the body of Christ in and to the world today. The good news is that a shared meal can unite people and build relationships across generational or socioeconomic divides.

I think Federated Church is a “dinner church.” (I know we like to eat!) We spend a lot of time around the tables in our fellowship hall. At those tables we share our stories and our worries, our laughter and our tears. We are about as diverse a congregation politically and theologically as is possible, but around those tables, we are one people, one church. An enormous amount of good can come out of shared meals in churches. Peace, unity and forgiveness, what the Bible calls “reconciliation,” happens around tables. *“All this is from God,”* says Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians, *“who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation”* (5:18). Finding agreement is tough today. We are not going to agree on every issue, and sometimes it's hard to be united in the same mind and the same purpose. But we can be one body at the table, living a cross-shaped life. So, let's eat together, whenever we can.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, who prayed for your disciples that they might be one, even as you are one with the Father; draw us to yourself, that in common love and obedience to you we may be united to one another, in the fellowship of the one Spirit, that the world may believe that you are Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen. (William Temple, 1881-1944)

Sources:

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