

Feeding and Following

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John 21:1-19

We have come off of two weekends – Easter and our Temple B’rith Kodesh exchange – where meals have been at the center. For us, the empty tomb was preceded by broken bread and a cup poured out. For our Jewish friends, the Passover Seder is at the heart of it all, repeated in smaller ways every Sabbath. If you scan our sacred texts, those moments repeat themselves. If you scan the Gospels, you will find Jesus again and again breaking bread, notably with people he shouldn’t have been.

The disciples are in the north again and Jesus is with them, but they do not know it. They go to fish but nothing is biting. He tells them to cast their net on the other side of the boat, and the net is filled to overflowing. Then they recognize Jesus. They share breakfast on the beach, Jesus again breaking bread with his friends. Then a kind of examination between Jesus and Peter. Love of and for Jesus is given evidence by Peter’s care for Jesus’ followers. Three times he says this, in order to punctuate the point. Do you love me? And then the invitation to feed, followed by the invitation to follow.

When Bonny and I were thinking about what was next now more than 15 years ago, what we celebrate this weekend was a central element. Worship mattered, of course. And we wanted to go someplace with wonderful weather 12 months out of the year. But what was core was a church that understood, if not completely and never perfectly, the link between loving Jesus and loving neighbor. That is in our Presbyterian DNA, I believe, when we are at our best, and it has been in the DNA of Third Presbyterian Church.

We celebrate a quarter century of Dining Room Ministry this weekend. I have deep gratitude, and not a little awe, for those who started this, for those who identified a real community need and had a vision, and for those who were able to implement that vision. It takes all kinds of people to make this happen—dreamers and doers, visionaries and implementers, history majors and engineers. And thank God we have had them all, so committed to this.

Every time I volunteer on a Saturday morning, or simply drop in, I am inspired by all that it takes to make it happen. That goes for our Food Cupboard on Mondays and Thursdays, our tutoring programs, the East Avenue Grocery Run, RAIHN, Habitat for Humanity, and many more. But

today is DRM's turn, as a representative of this church's best impulses, and a symbol of what faith looks like.

In her book called *Take This Bread*, Sara Miles tells her story. An avowed atheist, she enters church on Sunday, an Episcopal church in San Francisco, and receives communion. That experience converts her on many levels. She writes: "Eating Jesus, as I did that day to my great astonishment, led me against all my expectations to a faith I'd scorned and work I'd never imagined. The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all but actual food – indeed, the bread of life. In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realized that what I'd been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people." She continues: "And so I did. I took communion, I passed the bread to others, and then I kept going, compelled to find new ways to share what I'd experienced. I started a food pantry and gave away literally tons of fruit and vegetables and cereal around the same altar where I'd first received the body of Christ."

Hers is a terrific story. It is our story, shared simply as a different page from the same book. Something about the heartbeat of our faith calls us to reach out, as if we have any other choice, reach out and feed.

Yesterday we held a memorial service in the sanctuary at the same time as we were serving our 25th anniversary meal in the Celebration Center. As the family was preparing to enter for the service, I reminded them of what was going on just the floor below. If there had been any scheduling conflict, I said, the meal would always trump a memorial service. That's how we roll, I said, and they understood. But even so I made a connection between the two, between the deepest affirmations of our faith about life and death and how we live that faith out in the real world.

As I have said, I am teaching a class at the divinity school on some of this stuff, and just this past session, we were talking about the sacraments. "Signs and seals," we call them. Signs and seals. Signs that point to something else and seals that confirm what already is. The bread we break in a few moments, and the cup we will pour, point to Jesus' love for us, his unquenchable and unshakable love. But so does every serving of meat loaf, or baked chicken, or ham and sweet potatoes. It might not be a sacrament, but it is certainly sacramental.

So we celebrate 25 years, with a profound sense of gratitude to those who were there at the outset and those who continue to plan meals, buy food and unload it, recruit volunteers, chop and pour and stir, wash dishes, set tables, greet our guests and visit with them. It is as about the most satisfying work you can do. Holy work.

I have just a very few thoughts about the future of DRM...

- It will continue to evolve. It must. How we do things now looks different than it did even five years ago, and certainly than it did 25. Nutrition needs, a new kitchen, a different profile of our guests, a generational shift in volunteers, if not two shifts. Past is prelude to future, and I am grateful that creative and inspired people are thinking about what this will look like going forward.
- I wonder – and I haven't spoken with the Trustees about this – if there is a way in our physical footprint to grow things, fruits or vegetables. I think it is called a garden. What would a Third Church garden look like?
- Your support matters. If you've never volunteered, do it. You will be changed, and for the better. I can't cook, but I can open cans and set tables and take down chairs and greet people. So volunteer.
- And know that if you pledge, that part of your financial support goes here, so that when we talk about money at Third Church, we are talking –in very concrete ways – about feeding hungry people.
- And note how I use the word "guests." Those who come for a meal on a Saturday are guests, just as we are guests at Jesus' table this morning. Not clients, not customers, but guests. One of our growing edges is how we deepen our relationships with guests, so that they can become friends. That seems a very Jesus thing to do, breaking down boundaries of all kinds. I am not Pollyannaish about this. I just know it's our calling, even when it's messy and complicated.
- Help us ask "what's next?" That could also be adding another day, a breakfast, for example. It might be expanding our relationship building capacity on a Saturday, which would take more volunteers. It might be expanding our services – what I have learned is that if people are hungry, they also have other physical needs, some of them very basic. Or spiritual needs.

These are just my not even half-baked ideas.

Happy birthday or happy anniversary to Dining Room Ministry, with deep thanks to those who got it rolling – especially those saints no longer with us – and those who keep it humming. May it continue to be a cornerstone of who we are and who we are called to be.

Do you love me, Jesus asks us. Of course we do. He asks us so many times we nearly react in anger. Then he tells us to feed his sheep. That will look like a million things, or a million and one, but it will look at least like what we do every Saturday, rain or shine, hell or high water, all of which we've experienced in one form or another.

Of course we will continue to work on other fronts to eliminate hunger. That is why advocacy is so important, lifting up a voice for those who have none. Until that perfect day, we will

continue to share a meal with our hungry friends, who have little resources, at least worldly ones. And as we feed, we will be fed. That's the gospel as well.

Then at some point by the grace of God we will have – we our culture, we our community – we will have done what needs to be done and hunger and food insecurity and crushing poverty will be memories. I hope even then that we will continue to throw open our doors on a Saturday morning to share a meal, with friends, laughing and singing and breaking bread around tables. That feels like communion to me, where all are welcome and all are fed, and there is plenty for everyone. Amen.