

“Table Fellowship”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
July 21st, 2013
9th Sun. in Pentecost

Genesis 18:1-15

Luke 10:38-42

‘One hot summer afternoon, Abraham was sitting by the entrance to his tent near the sacred trees of Mamre, when the Lord appeared to him.

Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby.’

Genesis 18:1-2^a

Let us pray... O God,

We look forward to the day when the sons and daughters of those who are afraid will sit down with the sons and daughters of those they feared

to share a meal and the hope for a better world together.

Amen

There is a famous icon by Andrei Rublev from the Russian Orthodox tradition that shows the three angels seated together, who came to visit Abraham & Sarah.

It is called “The Icon of The Holy Trinity” because the story in Genesis describes the three persons who appeared to Abraham as ‘the Lord’.

I have heard that this sacred image is also called “The Icon of Hospitality” – which is the title of an older image of the same event.

That painting is from the Roman Catholic tradition, and had been painted on a wall of the catacombs.

I was surprised to learn that ‘Hospitality’ was so significant to these ancient traditions of Christianity.

Then again, it serves as another piece to the puzzle for an emerging vision of how the early Church was planted, took root, and grew beyond the borders of the Middle East.

In our lesson from Genesis,

God visits Abraham who doesn’t have to be told who this is – he knows.

Therefore, he gets right to work preparing for these important guests –

by telling his wife, Sarah, to start cooking,

and he sends his servant to barbecue the best calf.

But he is so nervous, he doesn’t realize his guests almost certainly ‘keep kosher’, when he serves them yoghurt and beef together,

milk and meat products together - that is just ‘not kosher’!

The three angels are very gracious, though,

and they don’t say a thing about this lapse in cultural etiquette,

but they do ask where Sarah is, because they have wonderful news –

Sarah is going to have a baby!

She overhears this and laughs,

because the alarm for her biological clock went off years ago.

She is decades passed menopause and never had children.

Willard, p.2

At first, the three guests seem offended and Sarah immediately denies that she laughed, but just as quickly, they say, “Oh, yes you did!” – and then, I imagine, they laughed, too...

Like the story of Abraham’s hospitality,
God comes to visit Martha and her sister, Mary.
Just as Abraham scrambled to prepare for his guests,
Martha goes to work frantically in the kitchen to put a feast together –
because she, too, knows who this is.

This short Gospel narrative with its wonderful dialogue between Jesus and Martha, seems to view people who are “spiritual” more favorably than people who are “practical”.

But I am inclined to believe this story is about two different styles of spirituality – of those who are “contemplative” and those who are “activist”.

Contemplatives are quite happy to sit down at a Bible study and debate scripture, but activists are out there, visiting the sick with casseroles, or organizing the church kitchen for a potluck dinner.

I don’t believe Jesus was saying one is better than the other, but rather that both the practical and the ideal are important.

Don’t we find both kinds of people in churches?
Don’t we need both kinds of spirituality?

I want don’t want to focus so much on that part of the story today, but rather about the food.

In both narratives, guests show up and the hosts prepare food – with the subtle reminder that Abraham & Sarah lived before the Jewish system of kosher dietary laws.

The Gospel of Luke doesn’t say anything about what they were having, just that Martha was putting together a big meal – certainly a kosher meal, but food and faith are intimately connected.

Christian theologian Gordon Wenham claims the kosher laws of Judaism were meant to discourage interaction with non-Jews or Gentiles, by prohibiting Jews from eating certain foods – like pork, or mixing milk and meat in the same meal.

Gordon J. Wenham, *The Theology of Unclean Food*, *The Evangelical Quarterly* 53, January March 1981, pp.6–15

However, there is nothing against Gentiles from eating distinctly Jewish food like matzo, bagels & lox, or gefilte fish – though I might personally make an exception about gefilte fish. Isn’t it ironic then, that some denominations won’t allow Christians of a different denomination – let alone non-Christians, from receiving “Holy Communion”?

Willard, p.3

In the United Church of Christ,

we celebrate Holy Communion as an 'open table' where everybody's welcome
to sit down and break bread together.

Holy Communion has been handed down through the centuries,

preserving an intimate connection with the Jewish Passover

as well as various traditions, interpreting what Jesus meant by saying,
"Do this in remembrance of me".

When I go on pastoral visits,

I have a kit that I have put together over the years,

using a wooded chalice for the grape juice,

and consecrated bread remaining from our monthly service of communion.

At times, I have taken church members with me on such visits

to those who are home-bound or at a rehab facility.

By celebrating Holy Communion in this way,

we are continuing a 2,000 year old tradition – not simply of communion itself,

but by bringing the 'Good News' of God's love into peoples' homes.

Those pastoral visits are about reminding us that 'Church'

is not just something we do on Sundays.

We need to be 'spiritually' fed, especially in those times when we feel isolated.

Jesus said people don't live by bread alone, but by the word of God –

the word that God is still speaking...

Pastoral visits are not simply occasions for

administering communion and a hasty prayer,

but an opportunity to visit as a friend.

It is my hope that such pastoral visits be the occasion of welcoming Christ

in our midst and in the spontaneous encounters with people not of the faith,

for the possibility, at the very least, to meet Jesus as a friend –

to see that Jesus is more about forgiveness than judgment,

a fellowship that is also about friendship calling forth the best and

holding one responsible to be the best, as a friend.

Perhaps it's not always possible to have a meal together with someone else,

but one of the meanings of Holy Communion is that we have a connection

with all Christians through the centuries who have come to God's table

ever since Jesus first sat down with his disciples

to break bread together at the Last Supper.

Willard, p.4

In our gospel lesson today,

Jesus was approaching the end of his journey to Jerusalem,
when he entered the house of Martha and Mary of Bethany.

As recorded in Luke chapter 10,

that journey began with a Samaritan village refusing
to welcome Jesus as a guest.

This whole block of stories begins with that refusal and ends with the offering
of the simple courtesy of welcoming a guest under one's roof
to share some food.

At first, the world did not understand those who brought the message of Christ –
and even violently resisted them.

But in the course of this journey of faith,

Jesus is finally welcomed into hearth and home.

Right now in our society there is terrible distrust and anxiety
over issues of race, gender, immigration, and religion.

One of the most powerful images to come out of the civil rights movement
was the word image Martin Luther King, gave in his “I have a Dream” speech
when he said,

“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia,
the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners
will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood”.

Today, I am privileged to have one of my best friends present in church,
Timothy Byrd, who has played host to me often in his home
when we were stationed together in Germany, serving in the Army,
and at his family's home in Florida
when I first came here seeking a pastoral position.

In a place called the Odenwald,

Tim Byrd and housemates Gary May and Pat Dolan
rented the whole top floor of a German family's house.

They lived amidst a beautiful countryside with rolling hills and farmland
which Tim nicknamed “Rivendel” after a place of refuge
in JRR Tolkein's Lord of the Rings.

I was blessed to have such a place to hang out with such remarkable friends
who were like-minded artists and musicians as well as soldiers.

Gary did pastel portraits, Tim could play the guitar, and I would draw.

There was some drinking, but not to excess –

I was in the company of good friends.

Willard, p.5

One thing that was the specialty of the house for anybody who stayed over Saturday night to Sunday morning was the coconut and cheese omelets. I didn't particularly like coconut and cheese omelets, but it was something I savored as part of the communion of just being with my friends, Tim and Gary and others.

In the years since, each of these friends became involved in the Church with their own families, but it was that spirituality, that fellowship somehow undefined, that left a tremendous impact on me to prepare me for ministry.

In the course of my spiritual journey, before I returned to America from Germany, I visited Israel.

On the last day I was in the Holy Land,

I found "the upper room" – the scene of the Last Supper and the Pentecost.

One of the impressions that I had of that sacred home was that it reminded me of the living room of my friends' place in Germany.

The only thing missing was the laughter, fun, music, food and drink of being with friends.

The Bible stories come alive for me when I think of my Army buddies and the friendship that must have existed between those early disciples, who became apostles, and their encounters with people to whom they brought the Good News of healing and salvation, the bread and cup, the songs and stories of our faith through Jesus Christ.

Amen.

The Missing Ingredient [from a story told by Emily Harris]

One day, a king went hunting and was caught in a storm
and got lost in the forest.

By night fall, he still hadn't found his way, but seeing a light through the trees,
he made his way to a little cottage.

Looking in at the window, he saw a Jewish couple inside about to
light the candles and say their prayers before their evening meal.

They see King at the window and bring him in.

He's wet and cold, so they set him down by the fire

and invited him to join them in their prayers and to share their meal.

They give him a bowl of stew and the stew is so wonderful,
that the King begs them for the recipe.

The wife writes it down on a piece of paper and gives it to him.

The next day, in the sunlight,

the King finds the road and returns to his castle.

He gives the recipe to his chef and that evening, he sits down to the table
with a big bowl of stew, but something is missing...

He has the chef brought before him to explain,

but the chef says he followed the recipe to the letter.

The King is upset and thinks to himself that maybe

they held out a secret ingredient.

The King overreacts and has the couple brought to the castle

where he accuses them saying,

"You are holding out on me! That stew you served me was so wonderful,
but you have left out a secret ingredient from this recipe!!"

The wife asked to see the recipe. She looked at it and said,

"It's all here. It's exactly the recipe that I use to make the stew."

Then the wife got an idea. She said,

"Sire, do you remember that when you came to us,
you had been lost and cold and wet.

We had you sit by the fire to get warm and dry before we fed you.

You listened to us as we lit the candles, prayed, and sang our songs.

Then we sat down together to eat.

Perhaps this was the missing ingredient."

The King smiled, because he knew it was true.

The missing ingredient was compassion.

*In our lesson from Genesis 18:1-15, Abraham and Sarah entertain guests
who they recognize as being from God;
and these angels have joyful news for the couple...*

18:1 One hot summer afternoon

Abraham was sitting by the entrance to his tent
near the sacred trees of Mamre, when the Lord appeared to him.

2 Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby.

He quickly ran to meet them, bowed with his face to the ground, 3 and said,
“Please come to my home where I can serve you.

4 I’ll have some water brought, so you can wash your feet,
then you can rest under the tree.

5 Let me get you some food to give you strength before you leave.
I would be honored to serve you.”

“Thank you very much,” they answered.

“We accept your offer.”

6 Abraham quickly went to his tent and said to Sarah,

“Hurry! Get a large sack of flour and make some bread.”

7 After saying this, he rushed off to his herd of cattle

and picked out one of the best calves, which his servant quickly prepared.

8 He then served his guests some yogurt and milk
together with the meat.

While they were eating, he stood near them under the trees,9 and they asked,

“Where is your wife Sarah?”

“She is right there in the tent,”

Abraham answered.

10 One of the guests was the Lord, and he said,

“I’ll come back about this time next year, and when I do,
Sarah will already have a son.”

Sarah was behind Abraham, listening at the entrance to the tent.

11 Abraham and Sarah were very old,

and Sarah was well past the age for having children.

12 So she laughed and said to herself,

“Now that I am worn out and my husband is old,
will I really know such happiness?”

13 The Lord asked Abraham,

“Why did Sarah laugh?

Does she doubt that she can have a child in her old age?

14 I am the Lord! There is nothing too difficult for me.

I’ll come back next year at the time I promised,
and Sarah will already have a son.”

15 Sarah was so frightened that she lied and said,

“I didn’t laugh.”

“Yes, you did!” he answered.

Luke 10:38-42

10:[38] Now as they went on their way, he entered a village;
and a woman named Martha received him into her house.

[39] And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet
and listened to his teaching.

[40] But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said,
"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?
Tell her then to help me."

[41] But the Lord answered her,
"Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things;
[42] one thing is needful.

Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her."

Inspired by Luke 10:38-42

NOW IN THE COURSE OF HIS TRAVELS,

JESUS ENTERED A PARTICULAR VILLAGE.

A WOMAN NAMED MARTHA WELCOMED HIM IN –
WHOSE SISTER WAS MARY.

AND MARY SAT DOWN BESIDE THE FEET
OF THE ONE WHO IS NOW CALLED 'THE LORD'
TO LISTEN TO THE WORD OF GOD.

MEANWHILE, MARTHA WAS OVERWHELMED
WITH MANY PREPARATIONS.

SO, JUSTIFIABLY, SHE SAID,
"LORD, DON'T YOU CARE THAT,
WHILE MY SISTER LEFT ME ALL ALONE,
I AM STUCK WITH THE COOKING?
TELL HER TO COME GIVE ME SOME HELP!"

BUT THE LORD ANSWERED HER, SAYING,
"MARTHA, MARTHA!

YOU ARE WORRIED AND DISTRESSED
OVER AN EIGHT-COURSE BANQUET,
WHEN ONE COURSE IS PLENTY FOR ME!
BUT THE HEALTHY PORTION MARY IS BEING SERVED
SHOULD NOT BE TAKEN AWAY FROM HER."