

“Love Is Bread Among Strangers”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Texts: 2 Kings 4:42-44

Mark 6:30-40

“And he said to them, ‘How many loaves have you? Go and see.’ When they had found out, they said, ‘Five, and two fish.’ Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass.”

~ Mark 6:38-39

Prayer

Holy God,

Nourish our faith with your Living Word. Amen.

During his short-lived public ministry, Jesus collected an unenviable array of personal insults and religious epithets. Some of the Pharisees accused him of being a servant of Satan.¹ Time and over again, Jesus’ critics called his Jewishness and his teachings into question by claiming that Jesus was a recalcitrant lawbreaker, who repeatedly flouted the Law of Moses and intentionally ignored the Tradition of the Elders.² Jesus was called a sinner³ and, at least three times, his most ardent opponents hurled at him the death-carrying accusation of blasphemy.⁴ His own family thought that Jesus was mad as a hatter.⁵ And, quite often, Jesus’ diehard opposers resorted to harassing language and offensive name-calling to tarnish one of the practices most cherished by Jesus: the very human practice of gathering to share a meal.

The religious, economic and political opponents of Jesus were terrified by his table manners and companions. Food and table sharing had a central place in Jesus’ ministry, but Jesus refused to allow his eating-and-drinking practice to mirror the structures of social hierarchy, economic stratification, religious restrictions or political distinctions that informed and shaped the table fellowship of his society. Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan described Jesus and his followers as **“hippies in a world of Augustan yuppies.”**⁶ Jesus often subverted the prevailing concept of the table as a miniature map of the vertical discriminations and lateral separations⁷ created by the dominant culture of his time. Jesus shared a meal with the hated men who worked for the Roman-occupiers, unmarried women, the poor, the sick, the outcast and even with his antagonizers. And it was precisely this type of table fellowship with no clearly set boundaries between people that earned Jesus the epithets of a glutton and a drunkard who befriended people with colorful lives and questionable behavior.⁸

Jesus’ opponents attacked his egalitarian meal practice, which Crossan defined in one of his books as **“open commensality,”**⁹ because they understood well that

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Jesus' table ministry created, even if only momentarily, a sacred space where people could imagine a community of solidarity grounded in God's love where the idea of eating and living together without any barriers, division, exclusion or pecking order was not immediately relegated to the realm of the irrational or impossible. Not unlike ours, Jesus' society was built on the false premise that food is a limited commodity and inevitably some will have enough to eat while others will have to get by without their daily bread. The guardians of the *status quo* feared Jesus' open commensality because whenever Jesus spoke about food, he never stopped at the point of attending to the basic human need for nourishment. In Jesus' ministry, food shared at an inclusive and welcoming table-gathering also reflected a commitment to offer hospitality and loving care to people who were hungering for more meaningful connections with other human beings, with nature and with God. In other words, Jesus' table gathering lifts up food, which in both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures is symbolized by the bread, as sustenance to the human body as well as an expression of the human longing for a community where everyone is fed and as a sign of God's presence among us.

This year, the Lenten sermon series is going to take us to a few of the table stories that shape our identity as followers of this Jesus who “**came eating and drinking**” and was accused of being a man who ate too much, drank too heavily, and hung out with misfits. Stories about hunger and food are all over the Bible and the Gospels are full of accounts where Jesus eats and drinks with people. Some of the most significant events in Jesus' life and ministry happened at dinner tables, meals, and feasts. The Last Supper still stands at the center of our faith tradition. The breaking and sharing of bread still sustain our spirits. The Bread and the Cup still nourish the faith of the Church that gathers very intentionally to resist the politics of scarcity and economic models that generate vast quantities of food for the few while driving hosts of people to the edge of starvation. As we remember the open commensality that Jesus practiced, celebrated and preached, I hope that we, our whole church, will find creative ways to reclaim the simple joy of coming together to combine food and fellowship.

I love the moment in this morning's Gospel lesson when Jesus, despite his disciples' well-intentioned concerns, encourages the large crowd of hungry, needy, vulnerable and weary people to sit down together in small groups. The disciples had looked around, noticed that it was getting late, estimated the number of mouths to feed, checked their own supplies, done their math and concluded that it would be humanly impossible to provide a meal for so many people. The only solution that seemed plausible to them was to tell everyone to go “**into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.**” To Jesus' surprise, his disciples' first impulse was to scatter the crowd and break up the community. None of them wanted the responsibility of caring for the needs of hundreds of people they barely knew. They would rather disperse that crowd of strangers than take pleasure in the effort to create a communal space where no one would go without food and God's love would be manifested tangibly in a joyful picnic at the end of a long day.

Clarice Lispector, one of the most internationally acclaimed Brazilian writers, wrote in a short story titled “*The Sharing of Loaves*” that “***Bread is love among strangers.***”¹⁰ Clarice knew what it meant to be an undesirable stranger that people would rather send away. Her parents and two older sisters were Ukrainian Jews. The entire family escaped the rising tide of anti-Semitism in Ukraine in the 1920’s and made a home in the hot and sunny coast of northeastern Brazil. Poverty, her family’s ethnicity, their status as an immigrant family and the fact that they only spoke Yiddish at home exacerbated the sense of alienation Clarice struggled with in her early years. As an adult, she shunned her Jewish roots and embraced everything Brazilian in an attempt to remove that label of being a needy outsider. Then, she married a Brazilian diplomat and for 15 years lived abroad in places where, once again, she was always the outsider and a stranger. Clarice disliked her duties as a diplomat’s wife. She resented having to attend gatherings, events and dinners that made her even more aware of her own otherness. In the short story I mentioned, Clarice wrote about having to go to a luncheon she had no desire to attend. But when the hostess invited the guests to the dining room, everyone was taken aback by the beauty and abundance of the table. Embarrassed, Clarice confessed her admiration for the hostess who shared so much food so graciously with people who had come to lunch without the blessing of hunger. As she savored the meal, Clarice couldn’t help but feel a sense of gratitude for human beings like the hostess who are willing to give away their very best even to others who may not deserve or appreciate their gift. Probably reflecting on her own life, which so often had been the life of a stranger that most people would think of as an unwelcome burden, and remembering the many times when people took, blessed and shared their own food with her, Clarice wrote those powerful words at the end of her short story, “***Bread is love among strangers.***”

Jesus wouldn’t send the people who were like sheep without a good shepherd off to fend for themselves. Instead, he chose to think of a way that would allow the whole crowd to stay together and have their physical and spiritual needs met in community. Jesus decided to show his disciples and the Church that would gather in his name centuries later that food is more than material nutrition; that bread embodies the human longing for relationships and communities nurtured by love and care. And, according to Mark, this is what happens after the crowd sat down on the grass: “***Taking the five loaves and the two fish, [Jesus] looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.***”

All four evangelists included this story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand in their Gospels. The early Christians believed this particular story to be important and undoubtedly hoped that Jesus-followers would never forget this moment in Jesus’ practice of open commensality when Jesus showed that food given away in faith or

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shared with the desire to serve the needs of others always makes love real among friends and strangers.

The disciples stared at the crowd and immediately started thinking about what could be afforded, what was prudent and how needs might not be met because there wasn't enough for everyone. Jesus, on the other hand, looked at the same five thousand men and to the women and children and, in an act of faith and with the conviction that there is more than enough food if we share the earth's resources in friendship and solidarity with each other, and he blessed, broke and gave the little he had away so that love could become bread among strangers and bread could become God's love on the table where everyone has a place and even a small amount of healthy food provides deep nourishment for the body and the soul.

As we enter this season of Lent, I invite you to imagine how you can share whatever gifts you have to make love – your love, God's love – real in our congregation and in the world. Maybe you can share a meal with a friend you haven't had over in a while. Maybe you can volunteer at the Community Meals during Lent. Maybe you will make an extra effort to come to the Lenten program on Wednesday evening at 6:30 to meet our neighbors from the South Acton Congregational Church and the United Church of Christ in Boxborough at a table with no distinctions in Hartman Hall. Maybe you can bake a loaf of bread and take it to a new neighbor on your street. Hopefully, you will help us create more opportunities for food and fellowship in our church to bring our scattered community together.

Friends, instead of giving something up for Lent, take on this practice of making love tangible, palpable and real in the way you eat and drink and nurture friendships and life-giving relationships. Who knows, perhaps, we will become known as the church that eats and drinks too much and befriends all sorts of weird people, where food always makes us attentive to the needs and longings of others and where bread is always a sign of God's love on the table of inclusion and solidarity that unites God, creation and humanity in a festive praxis of open commensality.

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Matthew 12:24.

² Matthew 12:1-2; Matthew 15:1.

³ John 9:24.

⁴ Mark 14:61-64; Luke 5:21; John 10:30-33.

⁵ Mark 3:21.

⁶ John Dominic Crossan in *The Historical Jesus*, p. 421.

⁷ John Dominic Crossan in *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 69.

⁸ Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34

⁹ John Dominic Crossan in *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 69.

¹⁰ Clarice Lispector in *A Repartição dos Pães*, Felicidade Clandestina: Contos, p. 97.