

Treasure from Heaven: A Communion Meditation
February 1, 2015
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Matthew 6:7-21

Sharing food, breaking bread around the table—it gets to the very heart and soul of our spiritual tradition and practice. Eating a meal together not only meets the most basic, most human of needs, but it also signifies our relationship with God and each other. In our spiritual tradition and practice, to open a space at your table for another is to open your heart.

Have you ever come upon a scene like this... a group of friends sit a table in a busy restaurant to share a meal. The table is already crowded, when more people show up. Those who are already seated scotch their chairs over a little bit and make room for the newcomers. Still more friends arrive, so the waiter decides to move another four-top over to accommodate the larger party. Everyone is laughing, telling stories, enjoying one another's company.

When we expand our tables and make them larger, we can't help but expand our hearts too. Inviting people to the table signifies that you recognize them as your neighbor, that you care enough about them to include them, and that you accept the responsibility of being their neighbor.

The Latin word for bread is pan, it is the root of our English words companion, companionship, company. Breadsharers. Life-sharers. Companions.

Being a companion is declaring that my heart is open to you, and your heart is open to me. My bread will always be your bread, and your bread will always be my bread. This is the way Jesus related to the world: Open-hearted. Expansive-hearted.

Imagine what that might have felt like to those who had the life experience of being turned away from everyone else's table. They were used to being excluded because they were a sinner, or a prostitute, or a leper, or a tax collector... unwanted and unclean. Yet, they were given a seat at Christ's table, offered bread from his hand – what an expansive love.

This was the kind of relationship Jesus cultivated with his disciples, and this was the way he wanted them to live with one another: Open-hearted. Table-sharers. Bread-breakers. It was such an important point that he included it in the prayer he taught them to pray “Give US this day OUR daily bread”

What other way is there to make the world a more loving, more hospitable place? It’s this embodied spirituality that we try to live into in our aspiration to be a church of “extravagant hospitality.”

The word “hospitality” comes from the Latin hospes, which means “stranger” or “guest.” The Greek word for “hospitality” is philoxenos. Philo means “love” and xenos means “stranger.” Love. Stranger. One stranger’s heart opens to another’s. One stranger invites another to the table to break bread. Two strangers become companions, and the world is transformed.

In ancient Greece, the practice of hospitality was tied to Zeus. Greeks referred to him as Xenios Zeus—Zeus the Stranger. They believed that anyone they met on the street could be Zeus in disguise. Therefore, hosts were to welcome strangers, wash their feet, offer them food and wine, and only after the guest was comfortable, ask them their name. Sound familiar? “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. I was hungry, and you fed me. Whenever you welcome the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you welcome me. Whenever you feed the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you practice extravagant hospitality.”

A report came out last year from the National Coalition for the Homeless entitled, “Share No More: The Criminalization of Efforts to Feed People in Need”¹. The report described how cities across the country are passing legislation intended to make it more difficult for service organizations or churches like ours to feed homeless people. Since January 2013, 21 cities have passed legislation restricting people’s ability to feed the homeless, or banning them outright from doing so. In addition to the 21 cities that have already passed such legislation, 10 more are considering it.

Typically, this kind of legislation restricts a group’s ability to feed homeless people by requiring them to apply for and purchase a special permit, and then limiting the number of permits the city will issue or making them too expensive. Other cities require a location that prepares food for the homeless to pass a strict code inspection, or they require everyone to

¹ <http://nationalhomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Food-Sharing2014.pdf>

possess a food-handler's permit (even volunteers). In other words, some cities have passed rules that non-profits that prepare food for the homeless, and most people distributing that food, cannot reasonably fulfill.

Now, I'm all for ensuring that groups sharing food with our hungry neighbors do so in a safe manner. But I doubt this legislation was created out of a concern that their health and safety we in jeopardy. I'm sure that it was motivated to make poverty (and the people who live with it every day) less visible. Homeless people gather in places where food is shared, for the simple reason that they're hungry. And when people congregate around food, they become more visible and harder to ignore.

From my perspective, the hardening of these policies reflects a hardening of the human heart. Pushing the marginalized further away pushes everyone further away from the kingdom of God. When we deny our homeless sisters and brothers a place at the table and withhold from them their daily bread, we practice fear. Fear is the opposite of love. Love is the heart softening, expanding, inviting, welcoming, offering, sharing. Fear is the heart hardening, tightening, closing, constricting, forbidding, rejecting.

The key to extravagant hospitality is our desire, willingness, and ability to open our heart. And to open it always further. It's not always easy, because it requires that we face the barriers that are preventing us from being open in the first place. That means facing our fears, which by definition is scary and unpleasant, and learning to allow our heart to be open to that which we fear, which means becoming vulnerable.

It's a profound path to follow, and one that we need to help each other navigate and travel. When we pray, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" we place ourselves squarely in a tradition that says it is the human heart through which God's will is to be done on earth.

And what is God's will? Here's one answer: it is God's will that strangers become companions, and that companions deepen the joy of their relationship. It is God's will that strangers, that people who fear each other, even enemies, become bread-sharers.

What other definition of healing, reconciling peace-making is there? Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. Peacemakers are those who share God's bread around the table. God's reign of peace on earth happens when people relate to one another as companions. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

When we share the bread on our table with the hungry... when we open our hearts... and show one another extravagant hospitality... that is a true treasure. And when we seek to create a world in which nobody is homeless or poor... a world in which nobody is excluded from the table, and nobody denied their daily bread, it's heaven on earth.

Thy kingdom come...Amen.