

Breaking Bread
The Monroe Congregational Church
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Acts 10:1-17, 34-48

The first home that Clark and I ever shared as a married couple was a 2-bedroom apartment on the second floor of a college friend's house near UCONN, our Alma Mater. The house was nothing special from the outside, the lawn was kind of overgrown and white paint was chipping off the exterior. On the first floor lived about half a dozen of our friends who were always coming and going.

About once a week we'd host "family dinner" for the entire house. I'd cook a big pot of spaghetti and we'd gather on folding chairs in our small kitchen. After dinner we'd all wash and put away the dishes together. Afterwards, some people would stay a few minutes, some a few hours. With no TV, we spent a lot of time in that tiny space just talking, or playing cards, and so did our guests: gathering and standing and dancing around one another on the decades-old yellow linoleum floor.

Hospitality is the hardest when we invite others into our space and ask them to make it their own. I know this because right after we were married, my friend Daniella moved in with us. She was only supposed to be with us for a few weeks, but that time stretched out to six months, then a year.

We learned some things during that year. Clark and I may have prided ourselves on our generosity, on our frugality, on our conviction that people matter more than worldly goods, but the anger we felt when our housemate dropped a few full wineglasses really put us right back in our place. We learned that we cling more tightly to our physical possessions than we thought we did. And we wondered if maybe what Benjamin Franklin famously said was true: *that guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days.*

The truth is, living in community can make life messy. It's so easy to be annoyed when the front door is left unlocked overnight, or get aggravated when someone leaves a coffee mug there in the living room. It's a little harder to notice how our own stuff may be littered throughout the house. We become attached to our things, our schedules, plans, and to-do lists, and housemates can often disrupt that, which can be frustrating.

I remember at the time that living with a non-family member challenged Clark and I to be charitable, hospitable, and generous even when it was hard. Often we were able to be these things, sometimes we weren't.

But we also know that living with our friend also made life richer, quirkiest, and, overall, a whole lot of fun. And you know what reminded us of that? That weekly family dinner. It's hard to hold grudges when you need someone to pass the bread. It's easier to let down your guard and just enjoy the moment.

Jesus called his followers to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:13-14). He envisioned his disciples forming communities whose very way of life stood in contrast to the deep darkness of the world. I like to imagine that when they were together, they liked to have a good time too. But I also imagine, in the aftermath of the resurrection, Simon Peter and the other disciples struggled. After all they had been through, collectively and as individuals.

Simon Peter, and all of Jesus' other followers, were trying to make sense of that which made no sense. This was new territory! And what do people usually do when they have entered new territory? They draw their circle of trust closer. Over time, some of the people they once feared – Romans, centurions, wealthy gentiles – were becoming part of the fellowship. I imagine that made them just a little anxious.

The funny thing about anxiety is, that it never really goes away. It just morphs. Today we still struggle with distrust and suspicion, fear and anxiety. Between the threats of war and terrorism, school and faith community shootings, division and discontent, it's a wonder that any group of people is willing to come together at all, let alone open their hearts to strangers.

Fear teaches us to pull back, to become wary and disengaged, to tend to our own needs before ever considering the needs of others. We cannot risk openness, we cannot risk vulnerability, and we cannot risk generosity and sharing because the resources of the world are scarce and each person must look out for their own.

I've increasingly come to believe that the only way out of this cycle of fear, anxiety and despair is through hospitality. That's how Peter overcame his. Without the vision of the forbidden food, and the word from an angel that it was good to eat, he NEVER would have had the guts to go to a Centurion's home and stay there a while. Peter HAD to accept the hospitality from this stranger, he had to choose love over fear, trust over suspicion, in order for the movement to grow.

Simon Peter, in his dream and through his interaction with “the other” learns that all Jesus taught was indeed true: in the kingdom of God, the table is wide and deep and long, where all are welcome and all are embraced. There is no fear in the Kingdom of God because there are no strangers here.

Human beings are not created to be anxious,
we are not created for fear and isolation;
rather, we are created for the communion and intimacy that is
the fruit of an ever-expanding love.

It is principally through coming together that congregations like ours learn to become living instruments of that kind of hospitality. In worship we hear the story of a God who is passionate about justice to the poor, vigilant in concern for widows, orphans, and strangers, and jealously protective of the vulnerable of the world.

Gathered here we engage in rituals of remembering in order to reenact them in our lives today. If at worship we hear stories of Jesus forgiving sinners, showing compassion to the poor, the shunned, and the forgotten, then we who have been baptized in his name are to witness those same gospel virtues in our lives.

Worship is the heart of hospitality of God because it is here that we are welcomed into the divine life, where we are nurtured, forgiven and blessed. More than anything, our time together on Sunday mornings should foster gratitude and generosity. That’s why we give our time, our talent and our treasure. We receive a weekly reminder that life is a gift, and when those lives gather we become a gift to each other. At no time is that more poignant than when we are present for communion, when we remember our call to serve each other.

Yesterday, the world lost a brilliant young theologian, by the name of Rachel Held Evans. In her book, Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church she wrote *"This is what God's kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there's always room for more."*

Any love modeled on the divine love must always be willing to make room for another, especially those who come to us hungry, forsaken, homeless, or alone. As our community continues to strive towards a more liberating hospitality, we too will glow with the goodness of God. And everyone who comes to us will see it, even in those moments when we struggle to see it ourselves. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.