

Eat

This is the first message in a three-part series, entitled, Eat, Pray, Love.

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress; he led them by a straight way, until they reached an inhabited town. Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things.

Psalms 107:1-9 NRSV

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Matthew 26:26-30 NRSV

I love food. I bet you do, too. It's one of the few things that we have to do to survive that can also be pure joy. Isn't it cool that God arranged things to work that way? We have to breathe, too, but there aren't too many times when I think, "Wow, that was a *great* breathe of air." Our hearts need to beat, but it's not like I ever say to someone, "Come on over and let's have our hearts beat together." I don't even say that to my wife. Eating is practical and pleasurable, serious and social, by God's design. And we get to do it six times a day!

When Elizabeth Gilbert, the 30-something author of “Eat, Pray, Love,” was trying to recover from a messy divorce, she set out on what she hoped would be a spiritual journey. Her first stop was Italy. She went there not to meet the Pope or to tour St. Peter’s Cathedral, but to experience the richness, beauty, and pleasure of Italian food and language. Doesn’t sound like a typical Presbyterian pilgrimage, does it?

At one point Gilbert makes a side trip with a new friend from Stockholm. They take the train from Rome to Naples, just to visit a certain pizza shop. And there she experiences a little slice of pizza heaven. Gilbert writes,

So Sofie and I have come to Pizzeria da Michele, and these pies we have just ordered—one for each of us—are making us lose our minds. I love my pizza so much, in fact, that I have come to believe in my delirium that my pizza might actually love me, in return. I am having a relationship with this pizza, an affair. . . . How was I to have known that there could be a crust in this world that was thin and doughy? Holy of Holies! Thin, strong, gummy, yummy, chewy, salty pizza paradise. Sofie and I each order another pie—another whole pizza each. [Eat, Pray, Love, pp. 79-80]

The crazy, wonderful, beautiful thing is that God wants us to eat him up, kind of like Gilbert and her friend devoured that indescribably delicious pizza. God wants us to consume, ingest, digest, and metabolize him. God wants to become part of us. God wants us to eagerly enjoy him in all his richness, like we would enjoy the tenderest steak, the freshest sushi, the richest black forest cake – or whatever your particular weakness is. We know that this is what God wants because he gave us communion.

We sometimes forget that at its core, communion is *a meal*. A meal in which our souls feast on God. In communion, God is the host, the guest, and the main course. Do you think God is trying to tell us something here? He wants to serve us. He wants to be-friend us. He wants to *fill* us with his power.

If all this sounds a little strange, it should. It’s not like any other faith. Go to a Hindu temple and you’ll find dozens of shrines with idols in

every niche. And at the base of each niche will be some ordinary grocery items: a quart of milk, a dozen eggs, a loaf of bread. These are food offerings for the gods, as if the gods need the people to feed them. Our Christian faith sees it completely differently. In communion God says, “Let *me* feed *you*. In fact, I want you to eat my blood and my body. This is *my* offering to *you*.”

God *could* have said, This is how you’ll grow closer to me: kill an animal and sprinkle its blood on an altar. Or say a particular set of words five times a day. Or do ten good things for ten different people. There’s nothing wrong with those activities. And many people have found them helpful spiritually, but they aren’t particularly fun in themselves and you have to go out of your way to do them. Instead, God said, take something that you do anyway, something that you really enjoy, and “Do *this*, in remembrance of me. *Eat* in remembrance of me; this will be your way into my heart and my way into yours.” Isn’t God good? All this reminds me of the quote attributed to Ben Franklin, “Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.” I don’t know if Ben really said that, but I do know that *communion* is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.

This table (the Lord’s Table) reminds us that at the center of our faith is not deprivation, but abundance; not isolation but community; not our personal struggle to achieve salvation, but God’s free gift of grace. Self-deprivation, isolation, and sacrifice are parts of our faith, but they aren’t the core. Can fasting be a helpful spiritual discipline? Of course. But eating can be, too, and it seems to be the discipline God prefers. Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness, but his reputation was as an eater and drinker. [Lk 7:34] Don’t forget the wedding at Cana. [Jn 3] They didn’t send out *John the Baptist* for more wine. Think about how much of Jesus’ ministry and how many of Jesus’ miracles involved meals or food. For Jesus, eating was a holy act.

When we look through the Bible we can see all kinds of ways that eating and spirituality go together.

God’s people distinguish themselves by what they eat. In Eden God allowed Adam and Eve to eat all but the fruit of one tree. In the desert God taught the Hebrews what it meant to eat in a Kosher or Holy way, different from neighboring tribes. Then Jesus came along and revealed that it’s not

what you *don't* eat that makes you holy, it's what you do eat – namely his body and blood in the Lord's Supper. Christians ever since have been known, not for refusing to eat certain foods, but for insisting on one particular meal, communion, as often as possible. No one eats bread and juice quite the way we do for the reasons we do.

In the Bible eating is also one way that God taught his people to rely on him. Whether it was manna in the desert wilderness or loaves and fishes multiplied by the Sea of Galilee, God met the people's need and drew them closer. God says in Isaiah, "Even if a nursing mother might forget her child, I'll not forget you." [Is 49:15] Hunger reminds us of our need for God; food on the table – including the communion table -- reminds us that the Lord provides.

In the Bible eating is often a sign of forgiveness. Think of how Jesus invited Zacchaeus, the crooked tax collector, to lunch or how Jesus ate a breakfast of bread and fish with Peter even after Peter denied him. It was Jesus's way of saying, I forgive you. Meals still bring people together: long lost relatives, old friends, blind dates, and bitter enemies. Even tattered relationships can sometimes be healed through the power of food—when God is behind the meal. The Psalmist says, "Thou preparest a table in the presence of my enemies." [Ps 23] He's saying to God, "You give me the grace I need to eat with people who have hurt me really badly." Healing may not happen overnight. It might take a lot of pizza. It may not happen at all. But at least you will have enjoyed some pizza and you will have opened yourself to the possibility of healing, which, in a wonderful way, is healing in itself. Don't underestimate the power of God working through a special meal. Just like being invited to this table can change our hearts, the mere act of inviting someone to dinner might set in motion a process of healing beyond your imaginings.

As a nursing baby bonds with her mother through eating, so we connect with God through this meal. This should be no surprise to us. Long before we use our eyes or ears to explore our world, we use our mouths. Psychologists call it the oral stage of infancy. When babies want to figure something out, to experience it, to connect with it, they put it in their mouths. Adults aren't a whole lot different. That's why the Bible says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." [Ps 34:8]. God wants us to

“eat” him, so that we can know him, so that we can love him. Just like Gilbert loved that pizza.

Wouldn't it be great if every meal could be like communion? It can be. Any meal can be a spiritual experience in *some* way.

Here are some hints. With Thanksgiving coming up it would be a real blessing if we could see mealtime as a time of communion rather than chaos.

Keep it simple. It doesn't take much for communion, does it? A piece of bread and some juice. Meals don't have to be fancy for God to show up. The location doesn't matter either. Scientists tell us that families that eat together tend to eat healthier, the kids get better grades, and the family members are happier – whether the family ate at home or not. Holy meals can happen at McDonalds as well as the dining room table. Faith-filled meals start with coming together, anywhere.

“What if I live I alone?” Invite a friend. Or better yet, someone you hope will become a friend. In the Presbyterian Church we never celebrate communion alone. We need at least three people: a pastor, an elder or deacon, who represents the congregation, and one more person. If Jennifer or I want to bring communion to someone's house, we need to bring someone else with us. If you and I want to make ordinary meals a spiritual experience we may need to invite someone else to join us – maybe even someone we don't get along with right now.

When Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered, there am I in the midst of them,” [Mt 18:20] he was talking about resolving conflict not having a tea party. Jesus wants to help us make peace with people. Take a chance. Invite someone to join you for a meal and see what God does. By the way, I got a call the other day from a woman and her adult daughter who will otherwise be alone for Thanksgiving. They would love to host one or more folks from their Second Family on that special day. If you would be willing to join them, just tell me and I'll match you up.

Slow down. One of the things I love about communion is that we take our time. We don't have to rush. Most meals in our house are like pit stops: we have exactly twelve seconds to eat before everyone races off to

the next activity. Meals don't have to be that way. When we slow down we get to focus on what we're eating and whom we are eating with. When was the last time you noticed all the flavors in a food? Take a moment to savor all the scents that can come from a single plate. Sometimes we need to hurry or multi-task during meals. But that makes it really hard to experience God. If we want communion we'll need to turn off the T.V., the radio, and the cell phones. In the quiet we just might hear his voice.

Pray. I'm sure some of us say, "Grace," some of the time when we eat. But every meal – no matter how simple -- can be an occasion for prayer. Whenever we're eating we know that some living thing gave up its life for us. The least we can do is pause and give thanks to God for that gift.

And don't be afraid or embarrassed to pray in restaurants. I've heard that food that's been prayed over just plain tastes better. I bet it kills germs, too. And it's a good witness for others. Remember that Norman Rockwell painting of the mother and son saying, "Grace," in a diner? The other patrons are craning their necks in curiosity. You never know whom you will encourage by your quiet example. And you might just find that your waitress or waiter has a prayer concern of their own. Ask them if you can pray about it.

So if you want to make a supper more spiritual, here's your homework :

- Invite someone to join you.
- Order the best pizza possible or at least microwave something.
- Turn off your phone.
- Give thanks.
- Eat.
- Talk.
- Laugh.

- Imagine Jesus laughing there with you.
- Order more food if you want to.
- This time eat it a little more slowly.
- When you are done and you are so full that you can't possible eat another mouthful - think of yourself so full of God's grace that you can't imagine ever needing more - because you won't.
- Then, give thanks once more.

Amen.

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