

“Imagining a New Old Church: Meal Manners”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

“Eat food. Not too much. Mostly Plants.” With these seven words, Michael Pollan began the most e-mailed article for the *New York Times* last week. Pollan argues that if we want to be healthy, we should eat “plain old food” that our great-great-grandmothers would recognize as foods – not food-like items. “Eat simply, he argues. Not too much. Mostly plants.”¹ Good advice for us on this day when Americans will stuff ourselves with nachos and other nibblers at Super Bowl parties.

But for the Apostle Paul, the point for the church is not so much we are what we eat, but we are how we eat. And, as to how the Corinthian church, a church that he had founded but had fallen into factions and fighting, as for how they were eating, Paul writes to them, “I do not commend you.” (1 Cor. 11:22)

This is the third and final sermon in a series that reflects on Paul’s words to the Corinthian church and contemporary questions facing the church. Paul’s letters to the Corinthian church give us a fascinating insight into the promises and perils of the church. They had begun so well. But after Paul left, they fell into factions, fighting amongst themselves. They fought about lots of things, but at the heart of their fights, it appears that a cancerous condition had set in, in which the Corinthians stopped looking out for each other and each group thought that they could make it on their own. After Paul hears reports, he sends them a letter urging them to once again be the church that God wants.

Through exhortation and imaginative imagery, Paul urges them to get along. Over and over, Paul argues that the church was created not by the fighting factions, but by God’s grace that called people together into the church.

In past weeks, we heard Paul emphasize that “there are different gifts, but it is the same Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:4). That we are not all alike. That God gives different skills and talents that are useful and important. And to try and stop the spread of this cancerous thinking that each one was more important than the others, Paul insists that varieties of gifts are activated and allotted “just as the Spirit chooses” (1 Cor. 12:11) and that they are to be used “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). He compared the church to a body made up of different parts – hands, eyes, ears, feet – each with different purposes. A body needs all those parts, and so does the church (1 Cor. 12:12-31). Last week we heard Paul’s ode to love, so often heard in the context of two people making promises to each other, that it is easy to forget that this brilliant description of love was actually addressed to a church community beset by factions. Living in love requires patience, a willingness to assume good motives on the part of those who disagree (1 Cor. 13).

As we have surveyed Paul's First letter to the Corinthians, I have largely focused on Paul's pleading that church to stay together despite their conflicts. In these words, we have heard some of the gems of our faith – a vision for the best of the church. But today, we get a glimpse of just what was going wrong in that Corinthian church. On this day in which we welcome nine new members, I almost hate to talk about one of the fights that was going on in the Corinthian church. But new members should enter the church community with open eyes. As my mother told me when I was confirmed more than two decades ago now, "in the church you will see the best of people and in the church you will see the worst of people."

And so, here in the eleventh chapter of First Corinthians, we hear of a food fight. A fight that, in Paul's eyes, made a mockery of the meals Jesus shared with his disciples and threatened to counter the meaning of communion itself.

Erase in your mind any image of tiny cubes of bread, carefully cut and counted beforehand, or thimble-sized cups of grape juice. There was a full-fledged meal around which the church gathered and worshipped.

From what scholars can tell, various individuals or families would bring the various items for the community meal. But problems developed. No one ever taught the Corinthians the code instruction on hosting a meal that goes by the initials FHB – family hold back. As Paul describes,

When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter, I do not commend you. (1 Cor. 11:20-22)

Imagine, I guess, something similar to our third Sunday lunches, with worship followed by a community meal. Instead of our wonderful chef Barb Westman and her team of volunteers, different people were responsible for bringing the meal. No problems there. But then there may have been some bragging about which members in the church could afford to bring food enough for the whole community, and it is possible that some of the wealthier members in the church tried to show off by bringing more expensive things. You can see a problem starting to develop.

It gets worse, for apparently, continuing to use the comparison to our 3rd Sunday lunches, it as if some of the people would rush downstairs before the postlude had even started, to beat the others to the buffet line and clean out the good stuff, helping themselves to a second glass of wine just as others were arriving to find the serving platters cleaned of the caviar and only a few helpings of jello salad left. "One goes hungry," Paul says, "and another drunk" (1 Cor. 11:21).

And Paul reminds them of what we now call the “words of institution.” The words Jesus used on the night of his last meal with the disciples. Jesus took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying,” This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” So every time disciples of Christ come together over food, all church community meals, are a reminder of Jesus’ meals, in which he ate with outcasts and sinners, friends and followers. And all church meals remember that last meal before he was betrayed.

As the Corinthians rudely ate and drank their way through the buffet line, they betrayed the memory and teachings of Jesus. This is what Paul is arguing against, about when he says, “for all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves” (1 Cor. 11:29).

Once again, we have a problem in how we eat. In our society, some have too much food, and others go hungry. Kindergartners go to bed without dinner, and go to school without eating breakfast and we wonder why they cannot learn. Young women face an epidemic of eating disorders fueled by unhelpful media images, while obesity has become epidemic and related diseases of diabetes and heart problems are on the increase.

We live in a time of incredible paradoxes. Recently I was at the gym, and climbed up onto my favorite treadmill in front of a television tuned to ESPN. Watching sports while running makes the time go faster, and watching athletes of all kinds can be a bit inspiring to go a little farther, a little faster. On this day, I had just started running when a new program came on, some great new championship. A hot dog eating contest. Here I am, a vegetarian looking for a little inspiration, stuck in front of a hot dog eating contest.

And today, on Super Bowl Sunday, on a day when America pigs out on nachos and guacamole, the church meal is of simple bread and simple juice. It was a youth group, in a Presbyterian Church in South Carolina now twenty years ago, that first noticed this paradox that the church who talks about simple meals and food enough for all, could do something to make our culture think on this Super Bowl Sunday. So they offered a twist on the name, Souper Bowl Sunday, inviting church members to remember the hungry.

Here at Central, we try to have our meals reflect our deepest faith commitments. Wonderful banquets of real food. Healthy. Round tables to encourage mingling and conversation. Enough food for all. Contribute what you can. With empty places waiting for you to sit down.

Here at Central we are recovering some long-lost Christian traditions, passed down from Paul to the Corinthian church, that on the night he was betrayed, Jesus was at table with his disciples. And today, we reenact that simple, final meal Jesus shared before his betrayal and arrest. Gathered with friends in the very presence of God, he took bread and wine. Real food, and as they ate, they found courage for the future and nourishment for the journey. And so we take real food, basic bread and simple juice, remembering Jesus.

And our community meals are to reflect some of what Jesus was all about. By eating together, by thanking God for the food that we eat and the hands that prepare it, we become more sensitive to all the overworked waitresses and an economy that uses cheap labor to pick food and slaughter animals. In our meals, we wait for others, look out for others, and as we eat together, our faith is nourished and we receive courage to follow where our Savior leads.

Kyle Childress tells the story of an ornery, hard-driving attorney who was known to make East Texas county sheriffs sweat with fear. Well, this man promised his dying father that he would return to church. He actually made good on his promise, and every Sunday, sits with his wife in the second pew. One day, while eating lunch with a group of attorneys, he said something uncommonly gentle to an overworked waitress. One of the attorney's remarked, "What's gotten into you?" He said, "I'm a Christian now."²

We are how we eat, Paul urged the Corinthians. We are how we eat together.

To God be the glory. Amen.

¹ Michael Pollan, "Unhappy Meals" in The New York Times Magazine 28 January, 2007.

² Kyle Childress, "It's About God," in The Christian Century 23 January, 2007, 16.