

September 27, 2009: The Meal
Luke 24:28-35
Peace Lutheran Church 25th Anniversary

We are in a brief series about worship, particularly about the fourfold worship order: gathering—word—meal--sending. Today we focus on The Meal.

I was reminded once again on our recent trip to Alaska of how meals can be **relationship-building**. Sharing meals with people are often bonding experiences. For example, Leslie and I enjoyed breakfast on a train-ride with two retired teachers from Florida. We made friends with a couple from New Hampshire over lunch on the ship. There is something about sharing a meal and a conversation that opens the way to relationships. When people get together, nothing compares to sitting around a kitchen or dining room table and sharing a meal, or having a conversation or playing a game.

There's a church in Pittsburgh that began one Sunday afternoon in 2002 with 20 people. It began meeting in the Goodwill building near the Hot Metal Bridge, so it became known as the Hot Metal Bridge Faith Community. One of the people on that first Sunday, Mrs. E, brought with her a crock-pot filled with beef barbeque. And from that first service and every service thereafter, Mrs. E has shown up with lunch for everyone, growing from a crock-pot, to a large roaster, to 4 or 5 large roasters, from feeding twenty that first Sunday to well over 300 now every Sunday.

The pastor, Jim Walker, says the meal has been the key to that church's growth. He says that God has taken Mrs. E's gift and used it to "help the lonely, the broken, and the rejected to find acceptance and healing in the kingdom of God." (Walker, 167) Walker thinks that **the table** is the place where **real ministry happens**. He says: "When people sit down, share a meal, and really take time to get to know one another... real needs are revealed. Our eyes are opened and we are moved to action, not because of some catchy cool ministry program, but because we come face to face with need."

Walker says it happens this way: "When Linda (whose roof is leaking and water is dripping into her bedroom) sits down with Dugan (who is a young engineer

looking to use his gifts for God's glory), a roof somehow gets fixed. When Karen, who works at a daycare center, spending all day with children, sits down with Pam, who is new in town and looking for something to do, a night of karaoke bowling somehow happens. When Willy and Marie, who live under the Tenth Street Bridge and have been robbed multiple times, sit down with Kate, who's just returned from helping people on the Gulf Coast and wants to be a light for Christ, a ministry to the homeless is born. See, when the church hires program directors and such and tries to command ministry programs from the top down, then there is very little ownership, and the ministry runs more like a business (or a ministry store). However, when the church creates a place where there is the possibility of authentic community, then the Holy Spirit moves. Instead of programs being created, people are actually loved and cared for. Isn't that really the goal?" (Walker, 167)

Where do you think Walker got that idea? From the gospels. From the ministry of Jesus. In the ministry of Jesus. the table is a place of grace. Often in the gospels, Jesus shares meals with people considered inappropriate by the religious leaders. Because to share a meal suggests an acceptance, a fellowship, a friendship, and the religious leaders wouldn't want to be considered friends with *those people*. Jesus has no patience with their self-righteousness. He has an entirely different vision. The table of Jesus embodies the new order, the alternate values of the kingdom of God.

Jesus dines with Zacchaeus a chief tax collector, "one who epitomizes the most reprehensible of Jews, traitorous to Jewish identity, collaborating with the Roman Empire in their conquest." (Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, 172) One meal with Jesus and Zacchaeus turns his who life around, committed to giving away half of his money to the poor. (Luke 19: 1-10)

In the house of the Pharisee, Simon, when Jesus sits at the dinner table, not only the table but the floor is a place of grace. Simon cannot believe Jesus is letting this disreputable woman bathe Jesus' feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. But Jesus makes it clear that the table and the floor and wherever Jesus is, is a place of gracious reconciliation. (Luke 7:36-40)

Sitting at another dinner table, Jesus noticed how people often scramble to sit near the host or important guest. He noticed how people like to associate with their own kind. But the table of Jesus is a place where all kinds of people gather, not just friends. So he told one dinner host the next time he has a dinner party, he ought to invite not his good friends, but the people who don't usually get invited: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. (Luke 14:12-14) Then his table would look like the table of Jesus.

“Jesus spent a disproportionate amount of time with people described in the gospels as: the poor, the blind, the lame, the lepers, the hungry, sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, the persecuted, the downtrodden, the captives, those possessed by unclean spirits, all who labor and are heavy burdened, the rabble who know nothing of the law, the crowds, the little ones, the least, the last, and the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” “In short,” writes Brennan Manning, “Jesus hung out with ragamuffins.” (Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, 51) That's what the table of Jesus looks like.

At the table for the meal which we call the Last Supper, there was one who made his living working for Rome and another who was intent on overthrowing the Roman oppressors. There was one who had made plans to betray Jesus and hand him over to the religious authorities later than night. There was one who promised to be forever faithful to Jesus, and just a few hours later was denying knowing anything about Jesus. Seated there are the ones who argued amongst themselves about which one of them was greatest, and the mother of two of them, had tried to secure places of prominence for her boys in Jesus' kingdom. A table of ragamuffins. The table of Jesus is a table of grace. All are invited. All are welcome. Wherever Jesus is present, especially where Jesus is the host, there is a welcome table, a table of grace.

Today we celebrate the 25th anniversary of Peace Lutheran Church. There is so much over these years for which we are thankful to God. For God's direction and guidance, for the Spirit's gathering this little community of faith and sustaining it. For the many people who have been a part of this congregation for a short time or a long time, and for the ministries that were developed. For the people to which we have been led, both in this community and across the world.

And we thank God for the gifts of grace which return us to the cross, and nourish and sustain us. For the Word, read, taught and proclaimed. For the water and the Word which claim us and set us on our journey. And for the word in the bread and wine, which gives us a taste of forgiveness and new life and hope.

Like the two disciples walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus on that first Easter day, when they see the bread, blessed and broken, and they recognize that this is no ordinary meal. And at this moment this is no ordinary table. And they exclaim to one another: Did you see him? Did you see him? The one with us was our Lord Jesus Christ. What a meal! What a table!