

## SUNDAY DINNER

John 6:24-35

Mealtimes in large families were sometimes most memorable. My family of origin is no different. Like most homes of the 60's and 70's we had "rules" we were expected to follow when it came to eating supper or any meal shared at the table. One cardinal rule, and one I think was probably fairly universal: we had to eat all the food on our plates if we wanted to have dessert. We were also never ever to criticize my Mom's cooking either verbally or nonverbally. To do so was to guarantee a double serving of whatever "it" was that we did not like on the menu for the day!

By the time the baby of the family arrived, our ages stretched a span of 17 years with George being the oldest, Françoise the youngest. By the time Françoise was born, George was already out of the house so it was fairly rare for all 6 of us to be home at the same time. We were enjoying our usual noisy, laughing meal when it was noted that Françoise had stopped eating. When prompted to finish she replied, "I can't, Mama, I am full." Mom, "You know you won't be able to have dessert right?" Françoise, nodded her head, her curls bouncing as she did so. Well, dessert time arrived and we all were given our portion, except for her. Françoise protested; "I want dessert too!" Papa, "You were stuffed, remember?" Without missing one beat, 3 year-old Françoise gestured with her hands and said, "But, I burped!" Big brother George roared with laughter and said, "That comment deserves dessert!" And sure enough her quick wit was rewarded. 3 years old!!

Many years later big brother George was at his own supper table surrounded by his wife and three kids. My sister-in-law, Patricia had just set supper on the table when Marc, their second child took one look at the "leftovers," and with a strong measure of disgust informed Patricia, "Mom, if we had liked this the first time, there wouldn't be any leftovers!" I think Marc was probably 6 or 7 at the time. Unfortunately, he had to eat the dreaded leftovers.

Meals can be and really should be memory making times, and interestingly enough the church as its own 'Sunday Dinner' as retired UMC Bishop, Will Willimon chooses to call Holy Communion. If we were to take the time, we would note there are numerous stories of Jesus sharing a meal with his followers and friends; The Wedding of Cana (John 2:1-12), his meal with Martha, Mary & Lazarus (Luke 10:38-42), certainly the Last Supper which appears in all four Gospels, and today, Jesus makes reference to the feeding of the 5000 from John 6:1-14 to the crowds who insisted on following him and his disciples who were trying to get away for some Sabbath Rest!

Jesus comes across as less than hospitable when he tells the crowd in verse 26, "*Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, you want to be with me because I fed you, not because you understood the miraculous signs."* The Contemporary English Bible reads in the following manner: *Jesus answered, "I tell you for certain that you are not looking for me because you saw the miracles,<sup>[a]</sup> but because you ate all the food you wanted.* (This is the reason I like referring to different translations – to help make sense of some of the archaic words, wording and sentence structure different Bibles utilize).

There was a name in 19<sup>th</sup> century China for persons who came to church because there were hungry for material food. They converted, were baptized, joined the church, and remained active members as long as their physical needs were met through the generosity of the

congregation. But once their circumstances improved and they and their families no longer needed rice they drifted away from the church. Hence missionaries called them “rice Christians.” Something very similar occurred in Eastern Europe when pastors were speaking out against the prevailing communist regimes. People flocked to cheer them on, but after liberation from Soviet rule the crowds dispersed and churches began to look as abandoned as they had before their liberation. In both cases they were coming for all the wrong reasons. People were using the church for their own gratification and personal interests. They were seeking material food when the church does and should always offer spiritual food – that which does not spoil. Jesus was offering eternal soul food and the crowds only wanted their bellies filled.

World War II martyr and Lutheran priest Dietrich Bonhoeffer, calls this: “cheap grace.” *Cheap Grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.*

Even today, the church has forgotten how to pursue what really matters. We have become accustomed to inviting people into the community of faith for all the wrong reasons: for the “right” kind of worship; for political engagement on behalf of our favorite causes; for the sake of a Christian America; for strong youth and family ministry; for the opportunity to practice mission in downtown locations; or to go on mission trips on foreign soil. (Feasting on the Word, Benjamin Sparks), But truthfully what we have to offer to the world - in Christ and by Christ and because of Christ is first and foremost “soul food,” which lasts forever and does not change with the changing circumstances of the church or the world. It is soul food for which we hunger, and soul food in which we rejoice, long after our bellies are filled with rice.

Holy Communion. The meal of the church. Sunday Dinner. Who would have ever imagined this sacrament of the church could become such a matter of intense debate? How often should a person receive communion? What form should a church use for communion? Who should be the one to give communion? Do we kneel or stand? Intinction or individual cups? Hawaiian Bread or wafers? Wine or Grape Juice? These matters have been known to divide churches which truly almost makes null and void the meaning of Holy Communion!

For decades there was discussion in the general church of the meaning of Holy Communion for United Methodists. Finally in 2004 an official statement was presented and adopted by the General Conference. It is titled, [This Holy Mystery](#). This report is available to download and print a PDF copy at [www.umcdiscipleship.org](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org). It is also available at Cokesbury and Amazon. But, you also have your Pastor to give you the Cliff Notes version of This Holy Mystery. I very much enjoyed reading it because it basically affirmed my own understanding of this Sacrament of the church.

First, a little history. As you know, John Wesley, Father of Methodism, was and remained an Anglican Priest. It is the practice even to this day for The Anglican/Episcopal church receive Communion every Sunday. Wesley believed in “constant communion,” which means each person should be connected to the Holy at all times and in all places. You have heard from Scripture that we are to pray without ceasing? Wesley believed we were to always be in the presence of God and there was no better way to commune with God than through the

Sacrament. *Wesley received communion several times a week. He believed that it was commanded by Christ, and that the benefits (forgiveness, grace, assurance) of receiving communion should motivate one to commune constantly. (ijboudreaux.com/2013/06/24/)*

John Wesley came to America ostensibly to convert the colonists and heathen Indians in the colony of Georgia. This venture of Wesley was not his most shining moment and he was literally banished from Georgia returning to England with his tail between his legs. This did not dissuade him, however, from supporting and sending future missionaries to carry on his work. Because of his Anglican background which stipulated that only ordained persons could administer the Sacraments, Wesley was faced with the dilemma of supplying the New World with more missionaries than he had bodies. I once read an account of a Circuit Rider who had a 26 point circuit between Virginia and Pennsylvania. The lack of ordained clergy to administer Holy Communion meant that the larger circuits might only receive communion once a year! Over time as more clergy became available, churches received communion quarterly. (Do any of you have memories of quarterly Communion?) The common practice today is monthly Communion on the first Sunday of every month. The General Church is now encouraging churches to return to weekly Communion and was actually adopted as a resolution at a General Conference.

So what, Pastor Tizzy!! Or perhaps, “what does it mean?” as we heard the people ask last week in our script!

As United Methodists, we accept Holy Communion as a Sacrament which plainly means it is a “means of Grace.” And “Grace is defined as the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit.”(UMC Book of Discipline) Hence, This Holy Mystery.

Why are you here this morning? I like to ask this on a regular basis. What brings you to church? Over the years, I have had several stock answers some good, some which make me sad. The one that makes me most sad is “Because it is what we do on Sunday.” Said in this manner, church is a habit, albeit it an excellent one. More frequently, I hear, “Because my week goes better when I have come to church!” Of course it does!! Would you expect your car to run on empty? Most come to church hungry for the things of God – and through the music, prayers, message and Sacraments, you are fed. There is nothing that can fill your spiritual hunger in any other way. In my simplest explanation of why one should come to church – is this – because we need Jesus in our lives and the primary way we can be with Jesus is through our prayers and worship.

What’s next? I invite you follow along on the screen or in your hymnals page 7 as we celebrate this gift of Grace. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.