

Pastor Jon's May 9, 2021, Sermon

Text: Acts 10: 44-48 and John 15:9-17.

“The Power of Meals”

One thing I have really been missing during this pandemic is eating meals with groups of people... friends, family, and strangers alike... without restrictions.

I also miss meals at church: Soup suppers, fellowship time after worship, meals after funerals and memorials, and communion the old way. These are coming as more people are vaccinated and the pandemic subsides.

In her interview, Kellie Escovy, our new seminary intern starting in June, described a formative worship experience she had in college called “Dinner Church”. People would come and eat a meal together and worship is incorporated into the meal setting. You can invite friends and neighbors to church to share a meal and worship at the same time in non-threatening setting. I hope she brings this style of worship for us to try out.

Amazing things happen at meals. You somehow become closer with people you share a meal with. Have you ever noticed that? The people you eat with likely become your friends.

Jesus shared meals all the time in the Gospels. I was once told that in the Gospel of Luke, you can find a meal setting in every chapter if you count the manger scene at Jesus' birth. Many of Jesus' teachings come during meals. Jesus always shared an open table with friends and antagonists alike. He didn't check id's before he fed them.

Jeranna's principle at her first teaching job in Syracuse, NY, was an African American woman. She told Jeranna the true litmus test of a friendship is if you have been in the person's home and shared a meal.

So what does this have to do with our lessons today? Well, both of the lessons we read in church today are connected to food and meals. I will focus on the Acts text from here on out.

In Acts chapter 10, Peter finds himself in the home of a Roman Military Commander named Cornelius preaching about the Risen Christ. We are still in the Easter season after all. Cornelius was a God' fearing Gentile. He prayed a lot and gave to the poor. He was sympathetic to Judaism. During the typical hour of sacrifice at 3PM. an angel appeared to Cornelius and told him to seek out a man named Simon Peter. So he sent two of his servants to find Simon Peter.

In the meantime Cornelius invited his friends and family over for this meeting with Peter. When Peter showed up at the house, he read the room saying, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with for to visit a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." I would be like, "Tell me more."

You see, just before this, Peter was hungry and saw a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven with all kinds of birds and animals on it that Peter didn't eat as a Jew. God said, "Peter, Kill and Eat." Peter protested. The message God was sending to Peter was, "All things are now clean." God shows no partiality.

Think about this- Peter thought and lived one way most of his life, and now is challenged by God to think another way... to be more inclusive of all foods and people. The Holy Spirit was fussing with Peter.

During this gathering at Cornelius' house, Peter got up and began to preach about Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection. And that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins. Suddenly, the Holy Spirit descended on all the people in Cornelius' household. The Jewish believers were astounded that the Holy Spirit fell even on the Gentiles.

Peter then asked the question, caught up in the Spirit, "Here is water, what is to prevent you from being baptized." And he baptized all of Cornelius' household.

This story is known as the Gentile Pentecost. We will get the traditional Pentecost story in Chapter 2 of acts in a couple of weeks.

What convicts you in this story? What is good news? For me, what if Peter didn't heed the call to visit Cornelius? What if he pre-judged him and gave up before he even had a chance to enter Cornelius' house? He's a gentile, I'm not going there. How many of you have your minds made up about another person who looks or thinks differently than you? We judge them, right. We get stuck in our thoughts.

The church is and always has been full of differences. And yet the Holy Spirit challenges us to be one in Christ amidst our differences. God is always pushing the boundaries of who is in.

The Holy Spirit is the main actor in the book of Acts. It pushed people like Peter and the church into places it wasn't quite ready to go. The Holy Spirit continues to challenge our long-held assumptions about others.

After this baptism, Peter was called back to the Home Office to explain what had happened. In Acts 11, I find this funny. I call it the Honeymooners text. 'Peter, you got some 'splaining to do.' The first question they asked Peter was, "Why were you eating with Gentiles?" Peter said, "The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make distinction between them and us." "Who was I that I could hinder God?" After hearing Peter explain.

The home office church leaders praised God saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." Hmm.

May the Spirit continue to challenge us to extend the boundaries of inclusion in our lives and in the church. Amen