

Julie Merritt Lee
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Sunday morning service

Providence Baptist Church
Hendersonville, North Carolina

“Sacred Meals and Sacred Conversations”

Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35; 41-51

What is with the phenomenon of going out to eat? People are eating out all the time. “It stimulates the economy,” some say, “don’t complain.” When I was little, we hardly ever ate out—only on special occasions. When I got a little older, we were lucky if we got to eat at Lubys (the local cafeteria) on Sundays, but that was about it. Now, it seems that eating out is like a sport; we spend more money on it than other hobbies, and we do it more frequently than ever before. When I was asked by the *Times-News* reporter what I do for fun/hobbies, besides saying that I love dogs, I thought for a second, I love eating...eating meals with people and sharing conversations. Something sacred happens when we eat even a common meal with one another.

Now, let me tell you what my favorite part of the meal is—the bread. I love bread. I believe in the anti-Atkins diet. I am pro-bread. Look at the food pyramid, bread is the foundation. Yes! If you go with me to Golden Corral, China Sea, Binions, Bella Regina or the Fireside Pancake House, I will be all about the yeast rolls, the sugar doughnuts, the twisty bread, and the pancakes. Scripture says “Man cannot live on bread alone.” I think it says that because it knows how easy it can be to think bread is enough—it’s that good. (Just kidding of course.) As one pastor said, “Like all food, [bread] ties us firmly to life. Look at the people Jesus heals who immediately reconnect with food: Peter’s mother-in-law, Jairus’s daughter. Look at Jesus on the shore, cooking a fish for his friends’ breakfast. Look at the two on the Emmaus road, inviting their mysterious new friend to eat supper with them.”¹ As Mahatma Gandhi said, “There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.”

Now in John, chapter 6, Jesus calls himself bread, but a different kind—the Living bread. If you eat of him, you will never go hungry, you will never die. Right before this chapter, Jesus had just fed 5000 men and more women and children with bread and fish of course. Later when the crowds finally find him and corner him, Jesus says, “You’re not looking for me because I performed that miracle, but because you ate of the loaves and had your fill.” He is saying, “You experienced me today, you saw who I am, had conversation, saw what I was about, and you

¹ Barbara Cawthorne Clayton, Blog on *Christian Century*

knew there was something there. Substance...like a good bread. And it filled you, and you wanted more.

You've had that—you know where you were with someone, having a great conversation, making a meaningful connection, and most likely it was probably over a meal or beverage. And something in you said, this is what living is about. The Christ in me is connecting with the Christ in you—we are serving each other living bread, and boy does it taste good. Your soul just comes alive.

Even the president realized having people over for beverages and pretzels could provide a healthy venue for dialogue. In the “Suds Summit” Obama invited both Henry Louis Gates, the Harvard professor, and Sgt. Crowley who arrested Gates for disorderly conduct. In this opportunity to sit around a table, they talked about the future and not the past. One political contributor said President Obama set the right tone because “he gives us now a model for which we can gather around tables to have discussions.”² Things change when you gather around a table. Gates even said “We hit it off right from the beginning. When he’s not arresting you, Sgt.Crowley is a really likable guy.” Funny how things change when you’re on even ground sharing a meal or a beverage. Having sacred meals and conversations can even bring about reconciliation and for sure deepens relationships.

I've already had a few meals with some of you, and it's already begun. We've come together in a different way, and we experience the Divine. I've been told that when Gail would share a meal with any of you in public, everyone was invited to break off a piece of their bread or cracker and she would say, “The Lord will bless the breaking of our bread together.” You may have not known it (but my guess is that you did) but you were sharing not just ordinary bread but the Bread of Life.

Jesus says, “I am the bread of Life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the Living Bread.”

How did this Living Bread choose to connect with people while he was here on earth? By sharing meals, which makes sense. I've already mentioned Jairus' daughter and eating fish with his disciples, even post-resurrection, shows you we'll probably be eating in our post-resurrection bodies. He does this also with Zaccheus and other “sinners.” This is what inflames the Pharisees. Jesus is not

² Jake Tapper, Karen Travers, and Huna Khan “Obama, Biden Sit Down for Beers with Gates, Crowley” *ABC News*, July 30 2009 (www.abcnews.go.com/Politics/story).

just talking to sinners, he's having table fellowship. Why is this so provocative to them? Because eating together is the great equalizer. It puts everyone on the same level. Jesus was saying by eating with the sinners, I'm one of you—of course we know he was without sin. But you get the point. Jesus is saying all are welcome at my table. Imagine the conversations, the jokes that were shared. "One man goes into a bar..." Belly laughs abound. Jesus says, "I'll have another," soda of course. And the "sinners" are amazed, he's not only talking to us, he enjoys it. Something's different about this one. He truly enjoys hearing my ideas, my thoughts, there is love in his eyes. I feel different." These people didn't just share some figs and some olives together, they encountered and ate of the Living Bread. This is true salvation, Jesus didn't share the four spiritual laws and then leave, but you get the sense that he enjoyed their company and wanted to stay in relationship with them.

To Zaccheus, he just came out and said "I'm coming to your house." Pretty bold, huh? No waiting for an invitation. No preparation time. And guess what, I doubt Zaccheus was worried that his house wasn't clean enough. Heck no. He wanted to be in the presence of someone transformative. I hope that that is how we see each other. So when we are sharing meals with other, we are sharing the love of Christ. We are eating of the Living Manna.

This week I've had the most wonderful conversations in Black Bear Coffee shop. Let me tell you there's a lot of holy conversations going on there. But I've had the opportunity and privilege to encounter people and truly see them and they saw me, and we were able to teach each other.

Let me tell you about one of these experiences: I was in line (for a long time) there were three people in front of me a girl that looked about 14 or 15 and her mother and father. I was holding Penny, which is a great conversation starter. I let the girl hold Penny while her father said how much they love this area. Being from Orlando, they have been coming to Hendersonville for vacation every summer for five years. He told me they are trying to find a way to get here more permanently. Of course he asked me why I moved here and I told him I was a pastor. He asked what denomination, and I said Baptist, Cooperative Baptist. You could see his head cocked to the side a bit, somewhat puzzled—intrigued. After a second or two of silence, I broke it, saying to the girl, "I notice you have an accent, where are you from?" She said Russia, which then started this whole other conversation, where I told him how I love Russian literature, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and he seemed more engaged the longer we talked. Somehow in the course of the conversation I gave him my providence business card, go Jane, and then we ordered.

However, it didn't end there. I perched myself in the back corner, my normal spot and dug into my sermon preparation. Thirty minutes later, I see the man and his daughter walking over towards me. They sit down at my table. She holds the puppy, and he says kindly, "Pastor Julie, I have a few questions for you." "Sure," I said, "Shoot." To ease into the conversation he asked what industry there was here and if a handyman like himself could make a go of it here. I told him I didn't know. But I had a feeling there was something else he wanted to talk about. A little more time, and he finally got there.

"So you're a Baptist."

"Yes." More silence.

"I am a Byzantine Catholic."

"That's wonderful," I said. "I think Catholicism and Orthodoxy are beautiful expressions of the Christian tradition."

"You've heard of Byzantine Catholic?"

"Yes." Stunned, he went into how he believed symbols and icons were windows to God and not idols like many think. I agreed with him. Somehow I mentioned the Reformation, and then he said, "Most people don't know it but there were two reformations. A whole tradition in the East before the church was centered in Rome." All of a sudden my mind was jogging back to church history class as I remembered these fascinating stories, and would you believe it, very uncharacteristically I remembered the date of this big split in the church. I shouted, "1054." And the next thing you know we were high fiving. It was a sacred moment.

And this is how the conversation ended. He leaned in and said something like this, "I've learned something today. In Orlando, I've known one type of Baptist, and I've witnessed their prejudice. Today I've met something else." Folks, this was a powerful moment. I knew we had just had a sacred conversation and tasted of the Living Bread.

Ephesians says "Speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body, and later, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may

benefit those who listen.” This is what holy conversation is about—it’s about being honest with one another and using words and listening to build others up. How many of us have been guilty this week of using our words, our conversations in unholy ways? But this is the challenge to us—to take up the bread of life and pass it to your neighbor, let them taste and see that it is good.

It is no wonder in the Eucharistic meal, that we use bread. Even though it looks ordinary, it symbolizes something quite extraordinary—the body of Christ that was broken for us. But what I’m pushing us to see is that even the very ordinary can be sacred.

My friend Matt, also a Wilshire resident, told me about a time he and some friends were preparing for a communion service at his former church. They were in a hurry, and so they grabbed the most beautiful round loaf they could find at the grocery store and went up to the church. During the communion time, which they did by intinction (where people come up get the bread and dip it into the juice), they noticed that after people were swallowing, there was a little bit of coughing. Afterwards, they looked at the packaging. It was jalepeno, cheese bread. But even in this bread, Christ was experienced.

So remember no meal is ordinary. Every time we eat a meal, every time we have a conversation, we are engaging and sharing the Living Bread. The love of Christ should be tasted in every bite, in every word, and similar to the Eucharistic meal, our lives should be transformed by the body of Christ, the Living bread. After all we wouldn’t want to wait a whole month or so, the holiest of holy meals, to experience the sacred. So let our food and our conversation be transformed into the sacred. Let us experience the Christ in one another.

I close with some lines from Barbara Cawthorne Clayton, an Episcopal priest and retreat leader, who wrote this recently on the *Christian Century* blog.

“Take and eat, Jesus says,
and let your simple bread become me.
Don’t let a single thing in your life,
however ordinary a thing it may be,
remain untouched by your new life in me.
Don’t think for a moment that it is an ordinary thing;
there are no ordinary things.
Allow your eternal life to transform *this* life,
so that the two are one thing, a seamless garment.”

Or I would say an unending feast!