

Throughout history and across many different religious traditions there has long been a curious linkage between spirituality and food. The Old Testament has its share of dietary restrictions and laws, many of which to this day translate into what observant Jews regard as “kosher or non-kosher” foods. Although the Christian faith has largely left behind such requirements, we still regard gluttony as one of the deadly sins, and some Christians promote strict vegetarianism.

Some of the foods that we eat daily have a religious background. In the mid-1800s there was a group of people in America known as the Millerites—a Christian sect firmly convinced that Jesus would return sometime late in the year 1843. He didn’t, of course. At least some of these folks, however, made the best of the situation by declaring, as a matter of fact, Jesus *had* returned but that it turned out to be an invisible, spiritual advent. Well ok, that’s what most of us would call the Holy Spirit. Believing themselves to be living in an already-present millennial kingdom, these Adventists decided that as part of this new identity they should invent alternative foods as a sign of their not being fully in this world. So, one preacher named Sylvester Graham invented a new kind of cracker for his congregation to eat. Yes, it’s called the Graham Cracker. Peanut butter was also invented at this time, another one of my favorite foods. A variety of cold breakfast cereals, including something called a “corn flake,” was perfected by Adventist devotee John Harvey Kellogg in a spiritual community located in Battle Creek, Michigan.

Food and spirituality have long been tied, but aside from observing occasional periods of fasting, no religious group has ever said it would never eat again. We know that we must eat and drink to live. If we go much more than three days without water, or a month with no food, we will die. Many organizations nobly work every day to get food to the world’s hungry and starving. The fact that thousands of children die of starvation every day is a vivid, and utterly tragic, sign of this world’s broken condition.

We need food to live. Those of us blessed so that we never have to worry about our food, also have the luxury of being able to *enjoy* creation's bounty in all its manifold variety. We even celebrate those uniquely skilled at serving up particularly tasty cuisine. Have you ever surfed cable channels that have to do with food or cooking? There have got to be hundreds of them!

In my first call out of seminary, I began my ordained ministry in a rural church, which had no educational rooms and about sixty people present on Sunday mornings. As I look back on my early sermons, they were very tolerant and forgiving folks. And gathering in that small, rural church helped me remember that every church, no matter how big or small, is important to God, and the people who make up the congregation are the body of Christ. Being in that small church reminded me that when they celebrate the Lord's Supper it is the same sacrament that we celebrate—even with the pandemic adjustment of a sanitary cup for the juice and wafer. We come to Communion because we all need the forgiveness of God, which puts us on a level playing field. And just as Jesus is present with us at our table, Jesus is present with them at theirs.

The church at Corinth had apparently forgotten what it meant to be a church. There were divisions among them, not because they were different but because each was doing his or her own thing. You see the early church had developed a lovely tradition in connection with the Lord's Supper. They had a meal that was called a Love Feast to which each member brought what he or she was able to share—kind of like a covered dish dinner. The resources were then pooled and the whole church sat down to a common meal which provided a beautiful picture of the oneness they shared in Christ. It was a way of creating and developing real Christian fellowship. Then, in connection with the meal the Lord's Supper was celebrated. This had a certain naturalness to it since Christ had instituted the practice at the close of the Jewish Passover meal.

But it wasn't the Lord's Supper that they came for. It was to fill their own stomachs. Some just ate, ignoring others. Some ate privately as if the meal was just for them. In the process others went hungry and some got drunk. In Corinth, the Supper was not a God-honoring act of the faith community.

Paul said, “*I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.*” These were a people who had forgotten their roots. They needed to be reminded that they were the body of Christ. And as the body of Christ Paul instructed them, “*So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together.*” In other words, they were to make sure that everyone was included, that the body is more important than any one individual.

By contrast, we live in an incredibly individualistic and competitive society. To be successful and win at any cost has become an essential value. Our country has become the most powerful nation on earth. Unfortunately, we rank near the bottom when it comes to crime, violence, and poverty. The economy may be booming but the gap between the rich and the poor is widening.

And what about the small churches? The experts tell us that congregations with less than 100 members will soon be extinct. They simply cannot meet the demands of operating a church or paying a minister to lead them. What is happening in the church is not unlike what is happening in the rest of society. The mega retailers and corporations are making it harder and harder for the little guy to compete.

The Lord’s Supper is the one place we are all on a level plane. We are all gathered around the table because we are sinful. The disciples who gathered in the upper room were no different. First, there was Judas, the traitor. Then there was Peter, who denied Jesus three times. James and John were there too, the two siblings who were competing to have the best seat in the house.

Paul reminds the people at Corinth that when we eat at the Lord’s Table, we are to examine our own lives. The only person to be judged is the one we see in the mirror every morning. All others at the table are to be treated with respect, since each one is welcome. No one is denied the opportunity to be part of the gathering. The sinful, the shameful, the guilt-ridden, the lonely, the oppressed, the broken. Even the conceited and the proud are all included.

Two weeks ago, tomorrow was April 19<sup>th</sup>. That’s the anniversary date of the student shooting at Columbine High School; and the anniversary date of the

Waco, Texas tragedy when David Koresh and his Branch Davidians perished in a fire. In addition, 168 people lost their lives in the Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1995. We are a nation that cannot forget or deny the destruction of innocent life.

It is easy for us to make judgments about those who commit hideous crimes. It's much more difficult to admit the harm we do to others. I believe we all have "selective memories." We have no trouble remembering major tragedies, but have a habit of forgetting our mistreatment of others. We remember other peoples' faults and weaknesses. We remember what harm has come to us and easily forget the support or friendship we have received. When we have selective memories, we conveniently leave out part of the story to make us look better, or to make others look worse.

Paul said that we are to "*proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*" The Lord's Supper is in itself an act of redemption. Every time we participate in it we are not just acknowledging the power of the resurrection over death we are experiencing it. Just as Jesus is known to us in the breaking of the bread, we are once again liberated from our sins. When we remember the resurrection without remembering Jesus' death, we are being selective. We remember the good part, but we forget the evil and cruel part of the story.

Proverbs 29:6 says, "*Evildoers are snared by their own sin, but the righteous shout for joy and are glad.*" It may take a long time for evildoers to become "snared," but that's no reason for us to refuse to *shout for joy and be glad*. Every time we participate in the Lord's Supper, we are literally getting a foretaste of that final, endless, incomparable feast that was guaranteed by the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is *joy* that we can access anytime, anywhere. We have not always been loving toward others. Truthfully, all of us have an absolute need of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. But mercifully, each one of us that gathers around this table is forgiven and redeemed. That is something that gives me shout-out-loud joy in God. I sincerely hope it does you too, because the supper we share today is *One Bread, for One Body*. Amen.