

“Table Grace”

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Starting Over, Digging Deeper message series

This is Labor Day Weekend... Are there any special meals planned with friends and family yet this weekend? Our family will share a fish fry meal tomorrow with family and friends culminating the weekend, the summer as school begins for the grand children on Tues...I am really looking forward to it because it brings us all together....

This morning I have a quick question for you... I am not calling anyone out, but just inviting you to consider your answer... How did the Son of Man come? Or how did Jesus come?

Luke 19:10 and Mark 10:45 tell us why he came – to seek and save the lost; to give his life as a ransom for many.

But how did he come? What was his *modus operandi*? Preaching? Healing? Teaching? He certainly did those things.

Luke 7:34 gives us the answer: “But Jesus himself says ‘the Son of Man came eating and drinking.’” (Luke 7:34). Eating and drinking – a lot. New Testament scholar Robert Karris says: ‘In Luke’s Gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal.’ So much so that his enemies accuse him of being ‘a glutton and a drunkard’ – someone who eats too much and drinks too much.

What is Jesus doing when he comes to earth? The Jews expected him to come with a bang, defeating God’s enemies and vindicating his people, you know the great conqueror!! Instead he shares a meal.

Meals are a powerful of expression of welcome and friendship in every culture. This is why Jesus’ meals are so significant – they embody God’s grace and begin God’s mission. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors were traitors not only to the nation, but also traitors towards God for they were collaborators with the Gentile occupiers, the Romans, who had defiled God’s holy land. So the table companions of Jesus led the Pharisees to conclude that he couldn’t be from God (Luke 5:30; 7:39; 15:1–2). A reasonable conclusion – unless God’s grace is so amazing that it allows him to eat with his enemies and unless God’s grace explodes all our expectations (Luke 5:27–39). Meals are central to the mission of Jesus because they embody and fulfill the grace of God.

Meals still have this power today. What was true in the culture of first century Palestine is still true today...In Luke 14 Jesus is eating at the home of a Pharisee. He suggests we shouldn’t invite our friends to our parties. Instead we should invite ‘the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind’ (Luke 14:13). Why? Because God himself invites ‘the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame’ (Luke 14:21) to his great banquet.

Our experience of God's grace should shape our mission. Often we do things for the needy, which is good. However, it puts us in a position of superiority – we are able; they are unable.

When I served in my last appointment we were called out in the VCI prescriptions that we had to retool our understanding of mission...We were engaged in mission "to" folks we wanted to help rather than mission with the folks, which meant we had a relationship...a friendship...

We in the church culture too often get involved with mission "to" rather than mission "with" the people we would like to help. We may proclaim God's grace, but it's readily interpreted as 'you should be like me'.

But what happens when we eat together? We share food as friends. We sit at the same level around the table. Then we can talk about our "shared" need of God's grace. We love to run projects, but nobody wants to be someone's 'project'. They want friendship, and don't we all want friendship?

It's not just that the table is a great context for community and mission. Food is central to who we are, how we relate to God and to the story of salvation. Food reminds us of our dependence on other people. We are tied into a network of farmers, traders, shopkeepers, cooks, families, traditions of eating.

Above all we are dependent on God. We are finite beings who need food to sustain us. We need to 'refuel'. But food is so much more than fuel.

Again and again in the Bible salvation is pictured as a feast with God. It is my favorite image of heaven the feast with God. When God leads the Israelites out of Egypt, the leaders of the people are invited up to Mount Sinai to eat and drink with God (Exodus 24:9–11). The rescue from slavery in Egypt – the defining act of Israelite identity – is itself commemorated in a meal, the meal of Passover.

At the high point of Israelite history, in the reign of Solomon, we are told 'the people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy' (1 Kings 4:20).

Even when things begin to unravel, God promises another meal on a mountain, 'a feast of rich food for all people' (Isaiah 25:6–8). On this occasion death itself will be on the menu and God will swallow it up. This is an eternal feast that no one need ever leave.

Jesus provides a foretaste of this feast when he feeds the five thousand. Here is a feast which need never end. Indeed there's more food at the end than there was at the beginning. It's a pointer to the fulfillment of God's promise: that one day we will feast forever in his presence.

So the meals of Jesus represent something bigger. They represent God's coming world. But at same time they give that new reality substance. They're the real thing in miniature through the bread and the cup. Food is stuff, it's not ideas. It's something you

put in your mouth, something you taste, something you eat. And meals are more than food – they're social occasions that represent friendship, community, welcome.

Our invitation to the feast of God comes at a price: the precious blood of Jesus his Son. We are outsiders, enemies, we feel excluded. But Jesus takes the judgment we deserve. He becomes the ultimate outsider – pushed out of the world onto the cross; forsaken by his Father. As a result we become insiders, friends, we are now included. The invitation goes out to all.

It's not an accident that at the heart of what it means to be the church is a meal. Jesus told us to remember him not in a pattern of words, but in a meal (scholars believe communion was celebrated in the early church as part of a meal).

The film *Little Miss Sunshine* is the story of a girl, Olive, who by default gets through to the regional final of the Little Miss Sunshine beauty contest. So her dysfunctional family head off in their dysfunctional van. She's a fat girl with big glasses about to enter a beauty contest.

At one point Olive says: 'I don't want to be a loser because Daddy hates losers.' Her father is a failed motivational speaker and his conversation consists of clichéd phrases that beat people up for being losers. The irony, of course, is that he's a loser and his family is losers. At one point he says, 'There are two kinds of people in this world: winners and losers.'

On the word 'losers' the camera pans round his family: his foul-mouthed father, his suicidal, homosexual brother-in-law, his son who refuses to speak, his down-trodden wife, desperately trying to hold them all together, and himself, the failed businessman who can't face his failure.

And they're thrown together in a VW van, which is itself dysfunctional – the door falls off, the horn is constantly on and they must push start it every time.

I sometimes look round the congregation any congregation that I visit or served and see a bunch of dysfunctional people thrown together, somehow managing to be family with all their stuff.

And I smile at the ridiculous grace of God. God does have a sense of humor to call us together to carry on His incredible mission to the world.

There's a moment in the film when they suddenly realize Olive isn't in the van. They've left her behind at a gas station. We see the van moving across the screen in one direction and they whisk her up into it, without stopping (because if they stop they won't be able to restart it). Then we see the van moving back across in the other direction and we hear the father's voice: 'No-one gets left behind, no-one gets left behind.'

That's the church: the place where no-one gets left behind.

We live in a graceless culture. A culture of competition in which we're all trying to get ahead. A culture of insecurity in which we're all trying to prove ourselves. A culture of spite in which we hold grudges, envy success, protect ourselves. In this culture our

shared meals offer a moment of grace. A sign of something different. A pointer to God's coming world. 'Life in the kingdom,' says Peter Leithart, 'demands that we adopt a new set of table manners, and as we observe this etiquette, we become increasingly civilized according to the codes of the city of God.'

Around the table we offer friendship and celebrate life. Our meals offer a divine moment – an opportunity for people to be seduced by grace into a better life, a truer life, a more human existence.

Jesus ate meals with people. If we routinely share meals and we have a passion for Jesus then we'll almost certainly end up doing mission. For those who haven't figured out what God wants us to be doing here is the beginning. Share a meal with someone and let the grace begin in relationship.

It's not that meals alone save people, people are saved through the gospel message. But meals create natural opportunities to share that message in a context that resonates powerfully with what we're saying.

One of the great things about mission through meals is that it enfranchises the people of God. We don't have to understand religious language or hold a crowd with our speaking ability. We don't even need to be able to cook. We just need to be people who eat and people who love Jesus. We United Methodists are known for our meals; it's part of who we are. This ought to be a natural as walking or sitting in a chair.

I'm not suggesting adding something new to your all too busy schedule. You already eat three meals a day – that's twenty-one ready-made opportunities each week to do mission and community.

You could meet up with another Christian for breakfast on the way to work – read the Bible together, offer accountability, pray for one another. You could meet up with colleagues at lunchtime. You could invite your neighbors over for a meal – better still invite them over with another family from church. That way you get to do mission and Christian community at the same time – all the while letting your unbelieving neighbors see the way the gospel impacts our relationships as Christians (John 13:34–35; 17:20–21).

Francis Schaeffer says: Don't start with a big program. Don't suddenly think you can add to your church budget and begin. Start personally and start in your home.

I dare you. I dare you in the name of Jesus Christ. Do what I am going to suggest.

Begin by opening your home for community ... You don't need a big program. You don't have to convince the AD board. All you have to do is open your home and begin. The meal. The grace. The mission.

Paul reminds us of this grace meal in the scripture this morning:

I Corinthians 11: 23-26 (Contemporary English Version)

I have already told you what the Lord Jesus did on the night he was betrayed. And it came from the Lord himself.

He took some bread in his hands. ²⁴Then after he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is given for you. Eat this and remember me.”

²⁵ After the meal, Jesus took a cup of wine in his hands and said, “This is my blood, and with it God makes his new agreement with you. Drink this and remember me.”

²⁶The Lord meant that when you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you tell about his death until he comes.

This is our mission until we die or until Jesus comes again.

Let us pray.