

“Remembering Meals with Jesus”
delivered Sunday, April 18, 2010
by Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor
Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC
John 21:1-19
Communion

Whenever we gather around the communion table we recall the Last Supper, that feast of memory when Jesus looked at his disciples, called them his friends, and then asked them to remember him whenever they broke bread and shared the cup of salvation together. This morning, in this gloriously hopeful season of Eastertide, John’s gospel invites us – not only to remember the Last Supper – but also to rejoice in the First Breakfast with the Risen Lord.

It is yet another meal with Jesus, a story so rich in detail it conjures up many other stories about his power and grace: how the disciples never catch a fish in any of the Gospels except with the help of Jesus; how by his blessing alone, they fed five thousand with a few fish and loaves of bread; how this three-fold affirmation of Peter’s love for Jesus here – reverses Peter’s three-fold denial of him the night of his arrest. Any meal with Jesus always seems to mean: your sins are forgiven; everyone is welcome at my table; take, eat, remember; go forth to love and serve the Lord.

But perhaps no meal pulls all of those blessings together quite like this breakfast on the beach. Unlike the Last Supper, with its drumbeat of denial, betrayal, torture and death as the sun goes down, here is a meal at the dawn of a new day that awakens in us the confidence that the same Jesus who showered those around him with abundant grace – still calls, still feeds, still empowers us – his disciples and friends – to do the good work of ministry in his name. The final gospel meal with Jesus was not the Last Supper, according to John, but rather the First Breakfast reminding us that the meal laid out upon this communion table is all we need for the day ahead, for our work to do, for any mission Christ himself calls us to accomplish.

Best known for his satirical commentary and prose, Pulitzer Prize winning Russell Baker, began his autobiography by describing how his mother, late in life, began to wander through time. After a bad fall, near the end of her life, "Some days," said Baker, "she went to weddings and funerals that had taken place half a century earlier. On others she presided over family dinners cooked on Sunday afternoons for children who were now gray with age. Through all of this she lay in bed, but moved across time, traveling among the dead decades with a speed and ease beyond the gift of physical science." When she was in some distant place, years deep into the past – at first – he would sit by her hospital bed and try to argue her back to reality...until finally he saw the appropriateness of it all. Baker wrote: "For ten years or more the ferocity with which she had once attacked life had been turning to a rage against the weakness, the boredom, and the absence of love of life that too much age had brought her. Now, after the last fall, she seemed to have broken chains that imprisoned her in a life she had come to hate, in order to return to a time inhabited by people who loved her, a time in which she was needed. Gradually I understood," Baker concluded. "It was the first time in years I had seen her happy." (1)

And so the grown son more willingly watched his mother live out her last days wandering freely through time, surrounded by the company of people who loved and needed her – in her memory – sharing various happy meals together that reminded her of a life that was abundantly blessed. By God’s grace, and the hint of resurrection looming, hers had ceased to be hopeless senility, but rather a feast of memory.

When we come this morning to this feast at the communion table, we make extraordinary claims. Because it recalls other meals we have shared with Jesus, it has the power, we believe, to break whatever chains might imprison us, so that we, too, might wander freely through time. Over and over again, this meal takes us into the company of Christ himself who loves us and needs us. And so, bathed in the light of resurrection today, we stand with those disciples there on the beach, having a meal with Jesus, so that we can be nurtured and strengthened to catch his fish, and feed his sheep, and to respond with gladness to his calling us anew: “Follow me.”

Most biblical scholars agree that this last chapter of John’s gospel is an Epilogue, a postscript, one more word added on to the last word of an already completed gospel. The preceding chapter, after all, included the resurrection appearances to Mary, and then to the disciples cowering behind locked doors until Jesus appeared and breathed his peace upon them, and sent them forth in his name. The 20th chapter has just ended with these words: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” Sounds pretty final, doesn’t it, a nice tidy conclusion to the gospel. Well, if Luke ended his gospel by adding on his sequel, The Acts of the Apostles, about the spread of the Christian faith and the ministry of the early church, so John gives us this Epilogue, a postscript for the same purpose. It is about the presence of Jesus among us, enlivening and empowering us to be the church.

As New Testament scholar, Tom Wright, observes: “Here is the secret of all Christian ministry, yours and mine, lay and ordained, full-time and part-time. It’s the secret of everything from being a quiet, back-row member of a prayer group to being a platform speaker at huge rallies and conferences. If you are going to do any single solitary thing as a follower and servant of Jesus, this is what it’s built on. Somewhere, deep down inside, there is a love for Jesus, and though – goodness knows – you (like Peter) have let him down enough times, he wants to find that love, to give you a chance to express it, to heal the hurts and failures of the past, and give you new work to do.” (2)

No place else in all of the church’s ministry so nurtures our ability to love Jesus as at this table. Here we remember his love for us through all the meals where he has feasted with us: – when he sat down and ate with tax collectors and sinners, – with Mary and Martha, – with five thousand hungry followers. When he spoke about meals in his parables – a man knocking on the door at midnight begging, please give me something to eat; – a tale about table scraps being thrown out with no regard to the hungry person at the doorway; – a great banquet given where some turn down their invitations with flimsy excuses, but the host extends his offer to everyone in the streets and highways and byways – a feast of forgiveness prepared for a Prodigal come home at last.

Jesus spent his gospel life moving from table to table, from meal to meal, and the common denominator of every single one of them was love. Love for the outsider, love for the one in the kitchen and the one listening at his feet, love for the crowds, and love for his friends, love poured out for his betrayers, love for each and every single one of us. Freely given, abundant, joyful, hopeful love – all – remembered today by his Risen presence on the beach.

All he asks of us who come to this feast of memory this morning is, “Do you love me?” And if we say, “Yes,” he says, “Love those around you as I have loved you... Feed my sheep.” Every thing you need to show forth that love is right here – the memory of a meal with Jesus, when in his Easter finest he says simply, “Come and have breakfast... here at the dawn of a new day.” Then, “follow me.”

NOTES

1. Russell Baker, Growing Up, p. 7-11
2. Tom Wright, *John for Everyone, Part Two*, p. 165.