

REMEMBRANCE

Scripture Readings: Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

Texts: Acts 2:38-39; Luke 24:30-31

My maternal grandmother died when I was about six. One of my few clearest memories of her involves Cheerios. My grandma loved to eat them; at home, we didn't eat Cheerios because our cereal tastes tended to run toward the sweeter side—this was at a time when Sugar Frosted Flakes or Sugar Pops were considered okay and 'sugar' was not a bad word. Now, it is not that I liked Cheerios that much, rather it was because Grandma gave them to me.

Further, in those days, they printed jet airplanes on the back of box, and Grandma would save the backs for my visits. I can see her sitting across the table from me, the sun behind her, and she looking for all the world like my mom, only a little grayer and rounder. I'd have a bowl of Cheerios and in between bites, she would help me cut out the planes and we would put them together.

My food memories of my paternal grandmother, on the other hand, are much more extensive and involved. As long as my grandfather was alive, grandma was responsible for the family Christmas dinner. She would prepare days in advance; on Christmas day, she, my mom, and my aunts, her daughters-in-law, would help her put the meal together. Our Christmas meal might contain variations from year to year, but most of the time, it was fairly standard mid-western fare: ham, turkey, potatoes, green bean casserole, oyster dressing, at least one Jell-O salad, and, for desert, pies! Usually pumpkin and mincemeat—real mincemeat, not the raisin/apple mixture one finds in the stores nowadays. We would have stuffed ourselves during the meal and most of us wanted a rest break but grandma would insist that we have some pie. We would finally give in and ask for just a little piece, and she would serve us a quarter of the pie. Those were the days that one was required to finish everything on the plate.

The meal was not just the food; my grandpa would be there along with my dad's two older brothers, and, as I mentioned, their wives. My older cousin would be there—and in time, he would add his wife and daughter. We were not a close knit family; my dad had been born a decade after his middle brother; they had left home before he really got to know them. We were scattered across Illinois and Indiana, and, at my grandfather's last Christmas, we had moved to St. Louis. In spite of distance, both literal and figurative, over that meal we could celebrate the season, re-bond the connections we had as a family, and share our stories with one another.

I wonder what is about food that bonds us to one another, and help us to reconnect.

I know that someone could explain the scientific physical reasons that involve hormones and blood flow, I suspect more. If food was simply a way to provide energy for us, then why do we go to such trouble to create delightful combinations of different foods; what would be the point of adding the right spices or herbs? Delicious food is more than fuel; the aroma and texture create such sensory delight that the food can create evocative memories and make those who dine with us also more memorable. Even simple, plain tasty foods can create this atmosphere.

Further, if food was simply a way to provide energy, then why has almost every culture in the world created rituals for preparation of food, and rituals for the meal itself. The rituals create a pattern for memory and add to the connection that the meal itself provides for those who partake.

I would imagine that everyone in this room has vivid memories that revolve around food and shared meals. Meals become focus points for us—each one of us can probably tell delightful stories of food preparation, meals shared, and the people involved. Food and meals connect us, they give us a chance to clear the air—at least for a while--, and through them we can rediscover common ground.

The impact that shared meals have on us can be perfectly expressed in the word, ‘companion.’ Those of you who know Latin, know that the word ‘companion’ comes from ‘with’ and ‘bread.’ The two words became one word in Middle French to mean, “one who breaks bread with another.” Our companions are those with whom we share ourselves by breaking bread together.

Food sustains us and heals us—again, literally and figuratively. Those who feed us are said to provide hospitality. We might think of hospitality as gracious welcome, but its word root also connects it to hospital—a place where one is healed. In a meal, we are welcomed and healed which may explain why in so many ancient cultures, when enemies dine together (especially with salt), they were required to refrain from conflict for at least a day. Personally I think that is a custom we should revive—before any political leader can attack the country of another, they should be required to dine together...with lots of salt.

So, perhaps, it should come as no surprise to us that one of the most evocative Easter stories concludes with the breaking of bread. Like all Easter stories, we begin with despondent and dispirited disciples uncertain and confused about what had happened on Thursday, Friday, and the rumors on Sunday morning. In spite of the flicker of

hope, these two disciples—companions if you will—decide to flee Jerusalem. They are joined by a third traveler who listens to their stories. As their story peters out, the stranger talks about the promise of God’s love and grace as described in the Hebrew Bible. Even though the words speak of hope and promise, the two companions don’t completely grasp its meaning. As they come close to their destination, they invite the traveler to join them at table, a hospitable act.

Once Jesus prays, breaks bread, and gives it to them, they see! Everything begins to connect as they remember an earlier meal before the crucifixion. Breaking bread connects them to the promises of scripture and it all comes together: in life and in death, we belong to God and God does not fail us in love and grace. Though they had provided the hospitality, it was they who were healed.

Bread and the breaking of bread evokes the connections: Jesus had truly made them—and makes us—companions of the way.

We should not be surprised that our only ongoing sacrament would revolve around food. Through the Lord’s Supper, we are made companions with Jesus and with one another. I would suggest that community meals also create the opportunity for companionship and hospitality. Those who feed us, those who serve, and those who dine are brought together to use the gifts of the earth for nourishment and even more so, for the coming together as a community.

When we break bread together, our eyes are opened and we can truly see the presence of Christ with and in one another. The secret ingredient in sharing our food during communion or at community meals is, as Marie Barone would say, love.

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