



What's in Your Lunch Box?

TEXT
Matthew 9:9–13
1 Corinthians 11:23–34

October 4, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

It's World Communion Sunday, which means, among other things, Christians around the world will be coming to the Lord's Table today. So of course, we will all be invited to come to this table. But World Communion Sunday is more than the event of bread and wine being served across the globe. It's a reminder of what it means to be the church.

One of the first things people noticed about Christians is that they ate together.¹ Everybody ate together. It's not common in many cultures for everyone to eat together. I don't know how we learn that, but we learn it early, and it shows up in the school cafeteria, doesn't it?

There are assigned seats in the cafeteria; it's a bit like church in that way. The cafeteria is the place where you eat with folks and where we refuse to eat with other folks. In my school, the cool kids ate by the stage. The athletes ate right by the kitchen doors. I ate with a small group of kids by the windows. We were in the school chorus together. And we all brought our lunch from home. The conversation at my table was "What's in your lunch box?" Sometimes we would trade food.

Eating is a physical reality, but there is something spiritual about eating together. When we eat together, we create connection; we build community. So when we eat, we pay attention to who is at the table with us.

The first thing that people noticed about the followers of Jesus is that they ate together. It would be like going into the school cafeteria and finding all the students sitting at one big table, like one big family.

People noticed. Why did they notice? Because it is unusual. What's more common? Did you ever watch *Downton Abbey*? Much of that show happens at the table. There's the family table, complete with white-gloved servants. And then, down in the kitchen, there is the servants' table.

Every society, in its own way, figures out how to segregate the cafeteria. But with the church, when the church ate, they ate together. Of course, this practice wasn't easy — which is why we have this passage from Corinthians. Paul is warning them about not discerning the body and eating and drinking judgment on themselves.

It sounds like they are not pure enough — or worthy to

come to the table. It sounds like Paul is saying, "You must make sure you are pure enough to come to the Lord's Table." But that's not it. That is precisely not it. No one comes to this table because we are worthy. We only come to this table because there is an invitation with our name on it. We come because we are hungry for the love that is served here. And we come because we are invited.

This table is free. The love proclaimed here includes all. You can't disqualify yourself from this table. And you can't disqualify anyone else.

In Corinth, the Lord's supper was a meal — not just symbolic expression like we do, but a real meal. That was good. But Paul was upset with them because when they gathered to eat the meal, those who arrived first would eat all the food, and those who came later found there was no room at the table. That's not church.

That's when Paul goes crazy. He says you can't engage in the practice that says we all belong to one another, while at the same time you leave people out. Don't you understand? You are the body of Christ. How can you leave out parts of the body?

Why was this so important to the early church? Because it was so important to Jesus. Jesus knows that eating together is spiritual.

Rev. Michael Curry is the Episcopal Bishop in North Carolina, and he tells of his parents going to church together when they were dating. This was in the 1940s. They visited an Episcopal church. They went up for the Sacrament, and there was a common cup.

The Currys were black. The church was all white. Black and white folks didn't share much in the 1940s, including water fountains, but a common cup pushed the limits. They stood before the priest, noticing his uncertainty of what to do. Then the priest lowered the cup to her lips: "The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was shed for you."²

When the church eats, we eat together. And people notice. That's the promise of World Communion Sunday. This table proclaims that the love of Jesus is free, and it is for all. It claims us all by name. This means it's not communion unless you find your place at the table. There is a place for everyone at this table.

I have been interested in the reaction to Pope Francis' visit. It was quite the event. He inspired many, and he was an equal opportunity offender. He called us to pay attention to climate change, to the disappointment of some and the elation of others. He called us to be more gracious to immigrants, to the elation of some and the scandal

of others. And then he had a visit with Kim Davis, the Kentucky county court clerk. And some of the folks who were singing his praises turned on him.

I find that interesting. I do not agree with Ms. Davis' interpretation of scripture, and I do not think anyone should use the power of the state to enforce your interpretation of the faith on your neighbor. I'm not a constitutional scholar, but I believe that's what it says. More importantly, I believe that's what the gospel says. We don't impose our faith on others. We don't conquer folks for Jesus. We seek to be winsome — a magnet that makes people want to be part of this community. I have some disagreements with Ms. Davis.

And when it comes to the pope, I think he is an inspiring man. I do wish he would let women be priests. I think that would be good. And I wish when he celebrates the mass, he would let you and me come to the table. I think that would be good. And I... well, I could give you a list.

But here's the point: No matter who the person is, we can excel at discerning what is righteous and what is unrighteous about that person. We are good at that. But regardless of what you think about this person or that person, how do we create a list of folks and say: "Because of my faith, I can't meet with you. Because of my faith, I can't eat with you"?

That's not church. In church, we know a few things about ourselves. We know that our causes are never as pure as we

think they are. And we know that our enemies are never as evil as we make them out to be. And we know that, when the sun has set and our work is done, the lives we offer to God will be a mixed bag. None of us comes to the table because we are worthy. We come not because of anything in us; we come because of the grace in Christ. We come because we are invited.

We know a good bit about Jesus' eating habits, and he was criticized for who he was willing to eat with — particularly when he ate with tax collectors.

There's an interesting detail in this text. I have told you before that when Matthew writes his gospel, he has a copy of Mark sitting on the desk. Most of Mark is cut and pasted into Matthew. Matthew adds a little here, and he makes a few changes there. In this story, he copies Mark word for word, with one change. He changes the name of the tax collector.

As Mark tells this story earlier, it is the calling of a tax collector named Levi. But here, Levi's name is changed to Matthew. Some say there were two tax collectors, but I don't think so. I think the writer of this gospel changes the name — and like a painter signing the corner of a painting, Matthew writes his name into the story of Jesus. He writes his name into the story of God's grace.

Matthew was a tax collector. He had wealth, and he had power. What he didn't have was community. Everyone hated him. No one called him by name. He was just a tax collec-

tor. He goes to the market, he goes to synagogue, he goes on the street, and no one calls his name; he is just a tax collector. But Jesus says, “Matthew, there is a place for you at my table. Could we eat together?”

I think the writer of this gospel changes the name and writes his own name in here because this says, “This is my story too.” I know this kind of love that calls me by name. I know this kind of grace that includes me and includes all. This is my story too. Matthew found his name in God’s story.

We all want that. We all need that. That is the gospel message: You are called by name to the table where love is served.

Maybe your faith is strong today, or maybe you are not sure you believe at all. It doesn’t matter. Come anyway!

Maybe life is good for you now, or perhaps you feel like the wheels have fallen off. It’s OK. Come anyway!

Maybe you are at the top of your game now, or maybe you are battling guilt or disappointment. That doesn’t matter. You are invited to the Lord’s Table, so come!

We don’t come because of what is in us. We come because we are invited; and evidently what Jesus is hungry for is to be at the table with you. It’s not the Lord’s Table unless you are here.

¹Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sundays* (2015), p. 125

²Ibid., p. 151

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.