

Dinner Meetings
February 1 2015
Mark 2:13-16

When I had been at this church maybe three or four years,
(so, like 22 years ago)
I was invited to serve on the Board of Operation Hope.
I had never been asked to be on a Board before,
so it made me feel very important,
and of course the work that Operation Hope did and does is pretty amazing,
so it not only made feel important but it felt really good, too.

I was not very old.
I didn't know that at the time, but I was not very old,
and certainly not experienced with Boards,
and I spent a lot of time in the meetings feeling very intimidated,
because everyone in the room was very professional and strong-minded and the work
was intense and important,
and so what I did most of the time was nod, with what I hoped looked like
understanding.

The year after I joined the Board, I was elected President of the Board.
Clearly a poor choice.
But in fact it was the only choice available to the other Board members,
because at that time there was a rule in place that the President had to be a member
of the clergy,
and for this reason alone I was the only qualified member of the Board.
(they've changed the rules since)

My first few meetings as President were poorly-run.
To be generous.
We had some big issues we were wrestling with,
and of course even good people can disagree on things,
and there was a good bit of, shall we say, *discussion*,
which often went on and on and people seemed to be getting testy,

and I didn't know what to do, 'cause all I'd ever done was nod.

I saw that I needed to do something differently.

So I started baking cookies.

Seriously. I started bringing homemade chocolate chip cookies to all the meetings, lots of them, big platters full.

Because here's what I discovered.

When everyone at a Board meeting is eating chocolate chip cookies, they're inclined not to argue -- I mean, discuss -- quite so much.

There is something about the act of pausing to wipe chocolate off your mouth that makes you, well, a bit sweeter.

People were just generally cheerfuller when they had chocolate chip cookies in their hands --

and it seemed something more, too -- it seemed that when a group of people sitting around a table began sharing food together,

what was a meeting became a meal.

And a meal feels different. Especially if it's a meal of chocolate.

I'm not saying I was transformed into their best Board president.

But I will tell you that a number of years later when I was actually asked to serve again as president,

the first thing the Board treasurer said was "does this mean we'll have cookies again?"

And of course it did.

The truth is, gathering around a table and sharing food makes something different happen between people. It just does.

Do you happen to remember a movie that came out earlier this century, a sweet -- literally, sweet -- little movie called *Chocolat*? (*Chocolate*)

Takes place in the 50's --

Juliette Binoche plays this incredibly talented chocolatier, who opens up a chocolate shop in this little French town, a conservative, staid town with a conservative, staid mayor.

And Vianne, the chocolatier, is kind of a free spirit, plus she opens her candy shop in the middle of Lent,

and so her presence ends up pretty much dividing the town.

The mayor declares that no good Christian should buy from her shop.
And then some gypsies come along, and that upsets people even more,
and one of them is Johnny Depp,
which is why some of us went to the movie in the first place.
But there's this wonderful scene where Vianne hosts a dinner party.
And she invites a bunch of different people,
including her gypsy friend,
and they're all pretty uncomfortable.
But when she seats them around the table,
when she puts food in front of them,
when she puts *chocolate* in front of them,
well then, the conversation starts, and the smiles begin, and the laughter,
and things start to be okay.
And later in the movie, the town priest, when he steps into the pulpit to preach on
Easter, says this -- one of the best religious speeches in any movie:
"I decided I don't want to talk today about Christ's divinity.
I want to talk about Christ's humanity,
I mean how he lived his life on earth:
his kindness, his tolerance.
We must measure our goodness, not by what we don't do,
what we deny ourselves, what we resist, or who we exclude.
Instead, we should measure ourselves by what we embrace,
what we create, and whom we include."

Which of course, was exactly what Jesus did.
Embraced, created, included.
And you know, he actually did it with food too.
Here's what he did whenever he came into a new town:
He got a bunch of people together for dinner,
and it was never the people that other folks expected him to eat with.
It was never the people that other folks thought he should dine with.
The gospels have all these lines in them like
"And then Jesus went and had dinner at Simon the Leper's house"
or "while he was eating dinner with the tax-collectors"
or "on his way to eat the home of the Roman centurion."

Because Jesus knew, he knew,
that there is something about gathering people around a table
that melts people's hearts a bit, opens them up to each other,
creates community.

I kind of love the passage that Adam read to you this morning,
because it's just so, well, perfectly Jesus.

It says he went up to a tax-collector named Levi,
who, by virtue of being a tax collector would have been the local pariah,
and says "hey, come hang out with me,"
and then it says Jesus pretty much just invited himself to Levi's house for dinner,
and brought along a whole bunch of other friends;
more tax-collectors, more assorted 'sinners' (quote, unquote).

Which then leads to a conversation between Jesus' posse, his disciples,
and a bunch of very grumpy religious leaders,
who say "what is up with your Jesus? why does he eat dinner with, like, *anyone*?"
They don't get it.

They don't get that that's the whole point.

They don't get that this Jesus is the one who embraces. Who includes.

Who breaks bread with everyone, to bring everyone together.

I'm reading a really interesting book right now, a book called "Day of Honey."

"Day of Honey."

It got incredible reviews, but I actually didn't know about it until my daughter Brigitta
tipped me off to it, because she's been working with its author.

The author is Annia Ciezadlo, who has spent much of her life as a freelance journalist
in the Middle East, in Iraq, in Lebanon, in Syria, among others.

So you might think it's going to be a book of MidEast politics,
but it's not what you'd expect --

The subtitle tips you off right away:

*"A memoir of **food**, love and war..."*

And if you flip to the back of the book there is a collection of wonderful recipes.

What Anna Ciezadlo does is to share the stories of these countries,
the stories of these people she has come to love, through food ...

by telling us about the meals that they have shared with her;

By telling you about the places where she has sat and broken bread with strangers,

with people inclined not to like or trust her,
with refugees and families trapped under siege.

And she says this at the outset of the book:

“There’s a saying in Arabic: *Fi khibz wa meleh bainetna*—there is bread and salt between us.

It means that once we’ve *eaten* together, sharing bread and salt, then we cannot fight.”

Which, she immediately acknowledges, is disproven all too often.

And yet, people long to make that saying true,
*people hunger for food and friendship during wartime—
for a communion that feeds the soul as much as the body.*

Which brings me finally, to why I've preached a sermon about chocolate and dinner and bread and salt.

We are ourselves about to share a communion that feeds our souls;
we are about to share a meal that brings us together.

We are also about to have a meeting,
not unlike the Board meetings I started off talking about.

And it's actually extremely rare for our Annual *Meeting* to be on the same Sunday that we share *communion* --

in fact, David and I couldn't remember the last time it happened.

But we think it's a pretty cool thing.

Just like my serving cookies at a Board meeting seemed somehow to turn a meeting into a meal, the fact that we're about to share bread and a cup makes our meeting less a meeting than a meal -- a meal where a whole bunch of different people have gathered at one table, to eat and talk together.

A meal of bread and cup.

Now, when it comes to communion, Christianity has spent a lot of time and energy trying to figure out exactly what that bread and the cup are all about.

Is it really Jesus' body? Does the juice turn into Jesus' blood, for real?

And by juice, do I mean juice or should it be wine?

And for bread, what kind of bread? Little wafers or no? Leave the crusts on?

But what if, when Jesus said "eat this bread, drink this cup, remember me," what if he was really trying to tell his followers, remember this *meal*. Not so much 'make sure it's this bread, make sure the cup is like this,' but really just "hey remember this *dinner* we had together tonight." Because *that's* what was special.

Sitting there with his followers, a motley crew of different folks and different feelings, he was spending the evening eating with them, talking and telling stories, bringing them together one last time, trying to make sure they were going to take care of each other when he was gone. And yes he shared bread around, and he shared a cup, and he said "when you do this again, remember me." But maybe mostly what he was saying was keep doing *this*. Keep coming together. Keep coming together with each other, but also keep coming to the table with people of all sorts, keep breaking bread with people you might not agree with, gather all kinds of people under your roof. Just like I've been doing.

And if that's what he was saying, then that's what we should be doing. Taking any moment we can to be together with people, especially people we don't know well, or disagree with, or feel like arguing with. Bring them to the table with us, and if not literally a table with bread or wine or chocolate, bring them into our hearts and our awareness and our perspectives.

Find ways to create community.
Welcome people under our roof -- this roof of our church, and the bigger roof of our care and compassion.

Share our bread -- bread that feeds the body, yes, but also share what feeds our spirits -- share our strength, our love, our hope.

This has been a meandering sermon, I know, and I thank you for meandering with me.

But the point that it's brought us to is this:

it's time now to share a meal.

All us different folks, all led here by different journeys --

this is where we share a meal,

hosted by the One who loved more than anything to bring people together.

A meal that is meant for everyone here,

a meal to which Jesus himself now invites you. **(go straight to table)**